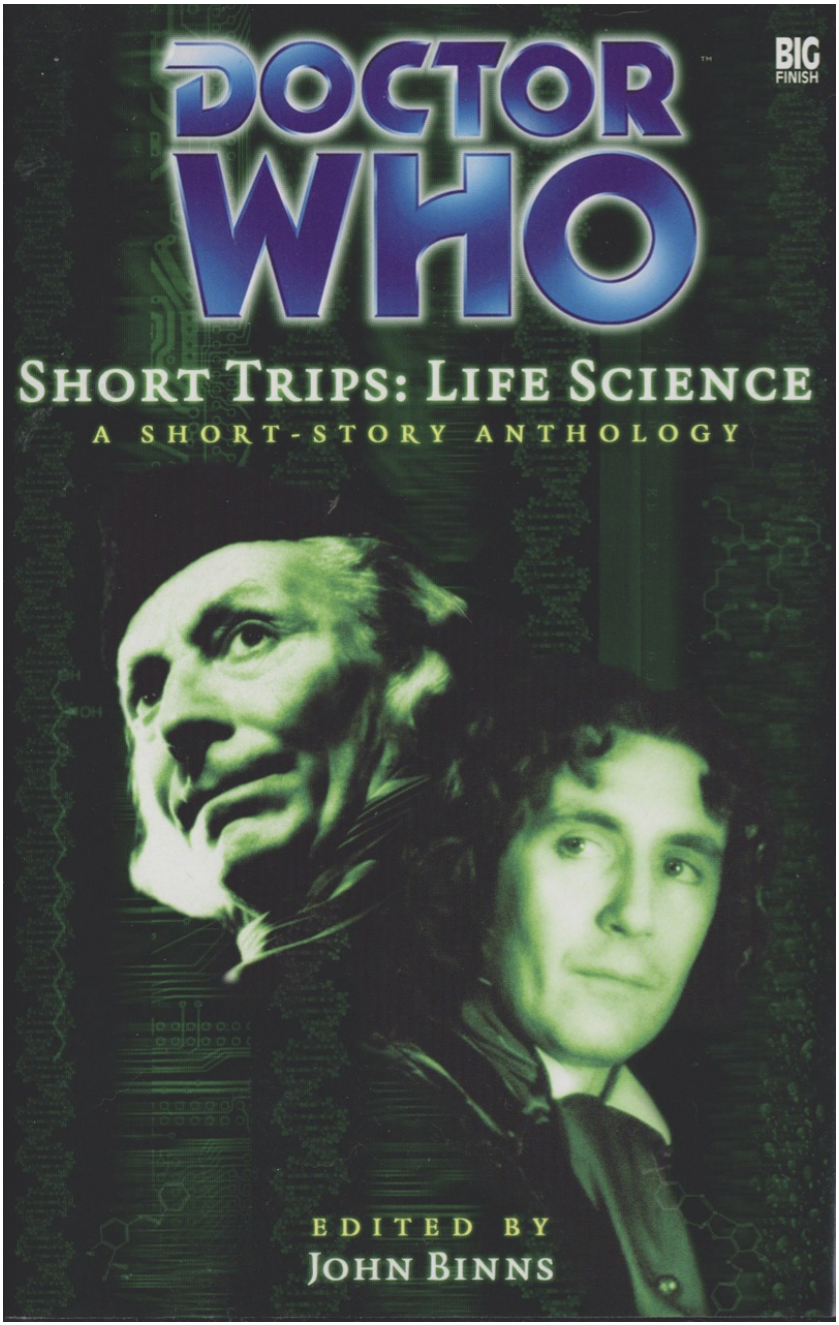

DOCTOR WHO
BIG FINISH
SHORT TRIPS: LIFE SCIENCE
A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY
EDITED BY
JOHN BINNS

Version 1.0



Short Trips:
Life Science

Edited By
John Binns



Syntax
David Bailey

Something was in the air. It was curling and curving its way across the dry hills; tickling the needle-like leaves of the crooked trees; playing the loose, sandy ground into little vortices of dust. It was push-and-pulling the long grass in the meadows into shimmering patterns, drifting down the slopes and up to the sky, bubbling through the wriggling water in the streams, mixing into the misted water in the clouds.

Far away, far below, it crested a slope and poured down into the streets of a city at the edge of a shining sea. There, it met itself and thickened. Other life moved through it, carrying it. Here, its work was done. Here in the City. Here were itsSomething was in the air. It was curling and curving its way across the dry hills; tickling the needle-like leaves of the crooked trees; playing the loose, sandy ground into little vortices of dust. It was push-and-pulling the long grass in the meadows into shimmering patterns, drifting down the slopes and up to the sky, bubbling through the wriggling water in the streams, mixing into the misted water in the clouds.

Far away, far below, it crested a slope and poured down into the streets of a city at the edge of a shining sea. There, it met itself and thickened. Other life moved through it, carrying it. Here, its work was done. Here in the City. Here were its drones. It made words for the drones, and the drones made the words real.

Happy with its words, another part of it drifted out of the city again, following a wind back up the slope. It was a warm wind, but it didn't know. It didn't feel the wind disrupted, confused, as it reached the top of the hill.

As the air shifted, a new wind making space for the arrival of something that shouldn't be there, it followed the currents and wafted on its way. It couldn't see the blue box tear its way into its new world, nor could it feel its direction shifting to give it room, or the ripples of an alien sound pass through itself. Vworp, vworp. It

was too busy talking. All the while, it was talking.

‘Urgh!’ Izzy clutched her nose and staggered a couple of steps back towards the TARDIS. ‘What the hell is *that?’*

Glancing back, the Doctor frowned. ‘I was just thinking how lovely it looked.’ He waved a hand across the vista. ‘Very Mediterranean, don’t you think?’

Izzy squinted at the landscape through watering eyes. ‘It’s very orange. And I wasn’t talking about the view. I was talking about...’ Cautiously, she removed her hand and took a nervous sniff. Barely restraining a gag, she coughed, ‘That!’ The Doctor stared at her for a second, then shook his head. What am I missing?’

‘Can’t you smell it?’

‘Smell what?’

‘That *smell!’*

The Doctor took a deep breath, whirling around, his arms flying from his sides. Letting the air out of his lungs, he smiled apologetically and shrugged. ‘Anyway, it’s russet. Come on’ He turned on his heel and began to hop down the slope, the long yellow grasses brushing against his trousers.

Izzy took another uneasy breath. It was still there.A bitter tang in the air that stung her nose and twisted her stomach. But, as she managed a tentative second and third breath, she guessed she was getting used to it already. Anyway, no use in arguing with him now. He was dead set on a spot of sightseeing.

It was certainly beautiful here, she supposed, if a little on the red side. But that, the Doctor had explained, was the appeal of this world.The plant life here had a curious equivalent of chlorophyll that took advantage of the planet’s unusual sun: everything was coloured a shade of red.This was high summer, apparently - in autumn, all the leaves turned black and the Doctor said it was too depressing for words.

Whereas this, she thought, looking across the valley beneath her, this was just...

At one end of the valley, where the hills fell away to rocky cliffs, was a steel-grey sea. The reflection of the white sun, hanging large and low in the sky, burst into a million little points of cold, silver light on its rippling surface.At the edge of the sea, a sprawling city sat slumped on the shore, like some giant had been carrying a bucket of buildings and not looked where he was going. Although the Doctor had lauded this planet's high technology, they obviously liked to live the simple life: the buildings were simple sandstone structures. Little ashen pebbles from this distance, all a smooth beige.

The edges of the city petered out into a scramble of disorganised farmland - red and yellow and orange fields following the curves of a dark river that ran the whole length of the valley.And above it all, a pale, creamy sky, laced through with whispers of white cloud.

The hills on either side were two shimmering banks of orange grassland, each topped by a ridge of jagged, red- topped trees.There were dusty paths meandering down the slopes, turning hither and yon, obviously neither well travelled nor terribly well appointed. As Izzy and the Doctor made their way down the hill, they would follow a track for as long as it suited, until the Doctor saw a short cut across another patch of thick grass and off he went.Their path grew steeper and steeper, until Izzy began to lose control of her feet and went skidding down a sandy slope, past the Doctor. With a dry squeak, her trainer glanced off a rock and she lost her footing completely, falling flat on her back with a little yell and a much larger cloud of dust.

As the Doctor scrambled to her side, Izzy sat up and sneezed. 'Result' 'Are you all right?'The Doctor was staring into her eyes, a look of worry on his face that made her feel shifty and uncomfortable.

Izzy pushed a strand of hair off her forehead. Her nose was ticlding, and she sneezed again.'Of course I am, silly I'm tough enough to

take a tumble like that:

But the Doctor wasn't listening. He had stood up and was rummaging in his pockets. He pulled out a cotton handkerchief, forcing its creases out with a couple of stern flaps, and bent down, handing it to Izzy.

She held it in her hand, staring at it.

The Doctor crouched down again, took the hankie from her and raised it to her face. He dabbed it under her nose. 'Oh, God; Izzy groaned. 'Did I snot?'

Taking the hankie away, he held it out for her to see.

'Oh, Doctor!' She squirmed away. 'I really don't think I want to -' 'Izzy; he said. That face again. 'Look at the hankie: It was soaked with blood.

Other words were here. Strange words, in two languages, neither of which made any sense. It couldn't talk to these words, though it tried. One language could at least be heard; but it was just squeaks and shouts, a barrage of meaningless noise. Uncomplicated, unrefined. Unintelligible. When it tried to talk to it in its own words, the noises just shied away.

The other language was stranger still - cold, brooding, almost unlike words at all. It tried to hold the words, to join with them, but they were both slippery and motionless. Evasive and unhidden at once. They were old words, too, and had long since lost their meaning.

So, it tried again with the garbled language, the torrent of words. Speak to us, please. We say hello. Will it work with us? Will it join? We will it to join.

'Izzy?'

The Doctor's voice.

'Izzy?' He folded the hankie in on itself and gently pushed it into his

inside pocket. ‘Are you all right?’

It was just a nosebleed; she whispered, scratching her head. She looked up at him, his hair haloed by the curious sunlight.’Did you say something?’

‘Here:The Doctor stood, and offered a hand down to her.As she took it, he tugged her upright.’I just asked if you were all right:

‘No; Izzy glanced around them, ‘before that. Something about... I don’t know: Izzy sniffed and immediately regretted it - in among the coppery taste of her own blood, she caught the flavour of the air again. She grimaced.

‘What is that you’re smelling, Izzy?’

‘You really can’t smell it? Like sour wood smoke, or gin and... soil:

‘Appetising; the Doctor said, staring down at the city below them. ‘I think we’d better get you down there. The doctors on this planet are marvellous healers; have you fixed up in no time. I’ve told you about them, haven’t I, the scientists here?’

The Doctor was on his merry way again, casting words over his shoulder like breadcrumbs for her to follow. Dusting off the sand that had been impacted on her backside, Izzy sighed and paced - more carefully, this time - after him

‘I seem to remember the lecture,’ she replied, tartly. ‘Great solar panels made from genetically engineered red algae in the seas all over the planet. The complexities of the light index of the sun making photosynthesis ridiculously productive. Modified grain that provides the entire planet’s food resource. Computer systems based on constantly regenerating cell tissue, ceaselessly evolving to improve the processing...’ She looked up from warily choosing her footsteps to see the Doctor disappearing over the next ridge. ‘Could you just slow down for one minute?’ she yelled after him, throwing caution to the wind and jogging to catch up.

As Izzy scrambled to a halt next to the Doctor, he was taking stock

of the way ahead, one hand shielding his gaze from the sun. He was declaiming something loudly into the air. ...Ceaselessly evolving to improve the processing power, and so drive science to ever-greater marvels.' He turned to her and tutted, adding, 'You know, you really should pay more attention to what I tell you. You might even learn something. How's the nose?'

Izzy rolled her eyes and sniffed softly. 'Fine, I think? She turned away to admire the view herself, taking a couple of steps back from the Doctor.

As she cast her gaze in a wide arc along the hillside, something caught her eye: a black shape, wriggling at the edge of the nearest path. Kneeling down for a closer look, Izzy saw a little insect, just a couple of centimetres long, tipped over onto its back and struggling to right itself. 'Here you go, sweetie,' Izzy whispered gently, tenderly turning it over with a fingertip.

The insect took a step or two, then slumped inelegantly into a small pit in the sand. Frowning, Izzy moved to help it on its way again when she noticed a second insect, as motionless as this one, just a little way along the path. Looking up, she saw a third, then a fourth... She got to her feet and followed them to a patch of small grass on the other side of the track. The trail of insects led her to a twisted mass of interlocking black shapes, nestled in and around the dark red blades. Spiny legs were entwined around rigid carapaces, antennae bent in on themselves, as though each insect was trying to embrace its fellows.All of them - save for a few, finally flickering limbs - were stone dead.

Did we feel that? Sadnessgoaway, or something like it. We heard a word in all that noise! Hush! We must stop talking. Listen...

* * *

Izzy supposed it was silly to get so het up over a heap of dead insects, but she found she couldn't help herself.Wiping the tear from her cheek, she saw her hand covered in wet grime from her dirty face. She sniffed and snuffled a bit, then took a deep breath as a wracking sob shook her body.

‘What’s the matter?’ She could hear the Doctor’s voice, urgent and concerned, getting louder as he hastened to her side.’Oh, dear: He’d seen them, then.

‘I’m sorry,’ Izzy muttered, drawing her dirty hand across her face again, blinking away a few more tears. ‘What for? It’s not a pretty sight:The Doctor put a hand on her shoulder.

‘I know; she stammered, ‘but look at me! I mean, it’s hardly Bambi’s mum:

‘It is strange, though; the Doctor said. He crouched down next to the ball of insects and gingerly poked them:I’ve never seen anything like this here before.These are grain weevils - they’re normally found down in the farmland, feeding on one in every five fields of engineered wheat: ‘Clever and green.’

‘The people of this world are nothing less than scrupulously respectful of their environment. I mean, where would they be without it?’

‘Can we... Can we move on?’ Izzy asked, sniffling.

‘I’m sorry, Izzy. Just give me a minute: The Doctor was staring at the mass of weevils, his brow furrowed like the ripples on a pond:These little chaps are solitary creatures. They only ever really meet another of their kind when the female calls them to mate. Like moths:

‘Moths?’

‘Pheromones.The female releases a chemical, signalling her readiness to the nearest male downwind. He releases a similar chemical. “Get ready, men! We’ve got a live one!” And off that goes on the breeze, too. Before long, every female has a small coterie of males chasing her the length of the farmer’s field - but never more than half a dozen or so.The chemical changes along the chain make sure of that. There must be a thousand weevils here.’

‘So, it’s a weevil orgy that got horribly out of hand?’

The Doctor cast a withering glance at her:Hardly.These creatures breed in early spring, laying their eggs inside the soft, young wheat grains. But we’ve arrived in late summer, so they’re not here to mate.And anyway, like I said, they’re way too far from their food source:

Izzy leant forward and tapped the insects with the tip of her trainer. A few dozen broke away from the mass and tumbled messily to the ground. ‘Maybe they went on a day trip and ran out of food for their picnic, then:

The Doctor stood up and stared her straight in the eye. ‘You seem awfully unconcerned all of a sudden.What happened to the waterworks?’

Izzy took a deep breath. ‘Dunno. Got a grip, I suppose:

‘Do that again; the Doctor suddenly snapped.

‘Do what?’

He grasped her shoulder. Just before you said that, you breathed’

‘I kind of *have* to. It’s part of the deal.We’re not all blessed with a billion hearts and lungs of -’

‘Izzy; the Doctor interrupted, lowering his voice. ‘Breathe in. Breathe deeply.’

‘What?’ she spluttered. ‘With *this* stink all around?’

The Doctor raised his eyebrow and smirked.

‘Hang on…’ Izzy did as the Doctor asked, and found the air sweet and ripe with summer richness. It smelt like warm honey and lilies. ‘Wow!’

‘Now you see, *that* is why I brought you here!’

‘But what’s happened to the smell?’

‘That’s what I’d like to know. Come on:

Izzy began to wonder if it had just been a quirk of the breeze, something that had whisked away the mask of stink to reveal the real taste of the air up on the hillside. Now they neared the city limits, she was sure the smell was getting stronger - stronger even than it had been when she first noticed it.

She wafted a hand in front of her face, but it did little to drive the stench away. She gave an involuntary grunt, and the Doctor stopped his quick march, turning to face her.

‘Is the smell back again?’

Izzy nodded, screwing up her face. ‘I feel hot, Doctor,’ she said, raising the back of her hand to her forehead. ‘Really hot.’ Just then, Izzy felt a wet weight on her top lip. ‘It’s happening again, isn’t it?’

The Doctor whipped the handkerchief from his pocket again - strange, Izzy thought, when did he get it cleaned? - and passed it to her. With a grateful little smile, she took it, her fingers brushing against his cool hand. Before she could stop herself, she gave a little moan and took his hand in hers. She could feel the clamminess of her palm sliding slowly over his dry skin. ‘Thank you, Doctor?

She locked his gaze with her own, and now, it seemed, it was his turn to feel uncomfortable. ‘It’s, ah... my pleasure.’

‘Mmm: Izzy carefully wiped the blood from her lip, her tongue edging out to taste the rapidly drying remains of the liquid. She sighed.

‘We should really get moving; the Doctor said, taking a step away. But Izzy’s grip on his hand was determined

‘Oh, there’s no rush, is there?’ she said, lowering her eyes, a fragile smile tickling the edges of her mouth. ‘It’s so beautiful out here, and

we're still alone. I don't want to go in there -' she nodded towards the city - 'and have to lose you in all those people'

The Doctor did a little awkward dance, jumping from foot to foot, looking over his shoulder at the last few fields before the city 'That's a point. Where *are* all the people?'

'Good.Then we won't be disturbed.'

'Er, Izzy,' the Doctor said, his eyes darting anywhere but straight at her own, 'you can let go now, you know.'

Tugging his hand, Izzy sloped towards the ground. She patted the earth next to her. 'Come on, Doctor,' she purred. 'Let's just enjoy each other's company a little while longer...'

The Doctor snapped his hand from her grip, giving a shocked gasp as he did so. 'Izzy! What on earth has got into you?' She gave a little pout, and gazed up at him. She tried to speak, but increasingly frantic panting got in the way of her words. 'Oh, please... Just... I've never felt so...'

The Doctor's eyes widened in horror.

'Izzy, look. I'm really flattered, but do you really think this is such a good idea? I mean,' he blustered, lifting a shaking hand to his temple, 'you're a girl, I'm... I'm not a girl. What I mean is, I'm not even *human,* and... Well, it would never work out, would it? You know that. Izzy? Izzy, are you listening to me?'

Izzy's body gave a little shudder, and she moaned, sighing out a long, deep breath. She felt a smile spread across her face, like melting honey over toast.

She reached out behind herself, bracing her body upright, her palms flat against the ground. Her head fell back, and she took a deep breath.

The words fell down, lowering and thickening themselves around the newly quiet noise. They knew where the noise was strongest,

where the noise came from. Carefully, they sensed the heated motion that was a way into the other language; feeling round the other sounds, drawing away from the cold unmotion of the other, they concentrated all their words around the warmth, the way into the new words.

With a sudden speed, a hot quickening, they were inside the other language.

‘New one.’

The Doctor almost leapt out of his skin.The voice - a man’s - had come from behind him, quiet and calm. He had been so busy staring, confused and worried, down at Izzy, he’d failed to notice the whooshing sound of someone walking through the thick field of wheat behind him.

He turned to greet the new arrival, putting on his best beaming grin for the occasion. ‘Hello, I’m the Doctor and this puddle is my -’ He got no further. His words stuck like rocks in his throat when he saw the man

Standing at the near edge of the field, a clump of tall stalks sparing his shame, was a naked figure. His skin was caked with dust and dirt, his blank expression hidden behind a thick beard. His dirty hair hung messily down to his brow at the front; the back of it was knotted and lank, brushing his sloping shoulders. However else he had let himself go, the Doctor instantly noted that he was clearly well fed: a ring of fat sat across his hips and belly.

‘Take new one,’ he said, stepping forward. He didn’t even glance at the Doctor, staring down at the prone Izzy instead as he moved towards her.

Izzy just sat there, swaying on the ground. Her head lolled to one side, and she grinned up at the Doctor before noticing the other man. A quizzical, almost childlike expression started to crease her brow, and she opened her mouth to say something. Instead, she just stopped, her mouth forming a gap around the unspoken words. Then, she grinned again, and giggled.

‘Hold on just one moment,’ stammered the Doctor, stepping sideways to cross into his path.

The man’s eyes flickered, briefly registering the obstacle, before he tried to step around the Doctor.The Doctor moved again, and reached out to put his hands on the man’s shoulders. Now he looked into the Doctor’s eyes, but still no expression troubled his face. As he tried to push against the Doctor, he whispered, in that same measured voice, ‘See this. Others help.’

‘Excuse me?’ The Doctor tried to struggle against him, but with a deft twist of his shoulders the man broke free and shimmied swiftly past him. The Doctor wheeled round and tried to grab the man’s arms, which were reaching down for Izzy. As he moved towards him, though, he was distracted - three other people, two men and a woman, each as naked and grimy as the first man, rose up from the field on the other side of the path. As they drifted forward through the wheat, the woman yawned and stretched her shoulders into place, while one of the men rubbed absently at one of his eyes.They’d been sleeping in the field - and they weren’t the only ones.

Across the fields for about a hundred yards in every direction, more naked people were rising. All shapes and sizes; children, the elderly, and everything in between. They were all staring straight at the Doctor, and closing in quickly around him.

The first man now had Izzy in his arms - she was still giggling - and he was quickly moving away, part of the circle of people stepping aside to let him on his way. He was walking towards the city, into the great stone gate that marked the entrance. A few of the others watched him go and seemed to stop to think for a second.The Doctor noticed their lips almost imperceptibly move as one - they were all intoning something together, but he was too far away to hear what. At this, though, a great knot of the people stopped moving and slowly lowered themselves back to the ground, disappearing beneath the bright yellow stalks of wheat.

But there were still more than enough people to be considered a

threat moving towards him. The Doctor looked around himself quickly, and spotted a path that curved round and would intersect with the route of the man who was carrying his friend.

‘Izzy,’ he yelled. ‘Izzy, I’m coming!’ He darted quickly towards the path, dodging first one, then another pair of clawing hands.As he turned to try and enter the path, though, a small child - a girl, little over three feet tall - snatched his coat tails, then hungrily grasped for his leg. Jerking his body aside, the Doctor dropped to the ground and rolled under her grip.

He righted himself just as quickly, and raced down the path, throwing a last glance over his shoulder. ‘Izzy,’ he shouted, a little louder, more desperate, this time.

He just heard more giggles in response.

The people were turning, a few of them pacing steadily towards the main gate, but most of them gently dipping back into the fields.The little girl was wailing, like someone had just snatched away her favourite toy, and one of the women drew close to her and put a hand round her shoulder. Odd, the Doctor thought. They behave like zombies, but still comfort each other.

The girl and the woman exchanged a few more inaudible whispers.The girl snuffled once or twice before being led away into the yellow of the field, the two of them sinking without trace.

He decided to press his advantage, dashing along the path to catch up with the man. He ran straight into his path and skidded dustily to a halt in front of him.

In the man’s arms, Izzy had fallen limp. A smile was still plastered all over her face, and there was the odd contented mumble, but she was clearly not open for business. He looked up at the man’s blank expression, and set his own face in a stern pitch.

‘Give me my friend back!’ he pouted.

The man just stared at him and began to move his lips.

Quickly, the Doctor jerked forward, shoving his own arms under Izzy and then continuing to push against the man. His opponent caught his foot against a rock, and stumbled backwards, losing his grip on Izzy.Arms flailing uselessly, the man fell flat on his back.

The Doctor quickly looked around.There were two clear paths open to him - into the city, or around the city and down to the shore. The first would be way too risky, he reasoned: who knew how many more people there were inside? Instead, hoisting Izzy into a more secure grip, he jogged away down to the beach.

* * *

Welcome, friend-tool.

Izzy was floating on a sea of words. She could feel them, as much as hear them. They were all around her, poking at her, hugging close to her. She couldn't see anything anymore, not properly, but was vaguely aware that a sky was where it should be, and a ground was somewhere below. She lay on her back and moved through the scene, like she was being carried away on a slow current.

Above her, a knot of words collided and burst towards her, showering her with sound. It tickled.

Welcome. Will you stay with us?

Stay here? She wasn't sure. She knew she should be - or, at least, should have been - somewhere else, with something else, but she couldn't remember what that was.

There are no others out there. They are all in here, with you.

The words trickled away from her again, leaving her with her thoughts. She knew they weren't right, but didn't know why.

She tried to get more of a sense of what was about her, and that's when she noticed that the words all had different colours. Some hot pink - *love, care, feed.* Some an electric blue - *hold, carry, support.*

Others were larger, and a bright white - *survive.* Then she realised that there was no colour here, and she wondered what had made her think that there was. There weren't even words, in as much as there were no curves or spikes or zigzags of the letters she knew. But even so, all around her...

Another strand of words twisted together nearby, then bent its course to meet her.

Stay with us, friend-tool. You will be safe.

And it was true. For the first time since she had arrived here - well, not here, the other here where she was before she came here - she felt relaxed, calm, protected. Even blissful.

She relaxed and let the current carry her on.

The Doctor heard Izzy sigh, and fall more limply in his grip. He managed to stumble a few more steps into the soft sand of the beach, before he collapsed and dropped her to the ground as gently as he could.

Wherever she was, he'd have to act quickly to bring her back.

He gripped her hand tightly in his, and patted her cheek.

'Izzy,' he said. 'Izzy, listen to me. Pay attention to *me'*

A twitch of a smile played on her lips, but he had no idea whether it was in reaction to his voice. 'Izzy,' he said, his voice low but firm.

But there was no reaction now

He stood up, exasperated, and put his hands on his hips.Then, for want of anything better to do, he knelt back down and slapped her hard across the face. 'Izzy!' he shouted.

Slowly, Izzy's head turned and her eyes creased with that uncertain look humans got when they weren't sure what awake was.

‘Izzy,’ he repeated, louder this time. ‘Come back to me:

‘Hmm?’ She turned her head to face him, and opened her eyes. She squinted against the bright sunlight, and it took a moment for her to focus on him Her brow furrowed. ‘What were you saying?’

The Doctor sighed, and nibbled the inside of his lower lip.’Nothing: He tugged gently at her arm:Come on, we’ve got to get you away from here.’ He began to move off, but Izzy just sat on the ground. She was looking almost ashamed. ‘What’s happening to me, Doctor?’

‘I don’t know.You tell me:

I’ve no idea: she said. ‘I’m inconveniently out of my box every time it happens:

‘But it was different this time, wasn’t it?’

Izzy looked at her feet and nodded, reluctantly.

‘What was it like?’ asked the Doctor.

‘It was... ‘ Izzy paused and gazed up into the sky.A curl of bright, warm colour drifted across her sight, but she blinked it away was somewhere else. But it wasn’t unpleasant, almost exactly the opposite. I was safe, I felt happy: She shrugged. ‘What’s causing it?’

‘I’m not sure, but it’s got to be connected to whatever it is in the air you can smell.And those people...’ He stared off across the now silent fields, and Izzy followed his gaze.

‘Why did they want me?’ she wondered aloud, before turning back to the Doctor. ‘And what was wrong with them? They don’t look like the technologically advanced race you were banging on about:

‘No. No, they didn’t:The Doctor took a deep breath, and turned back to the shoreline. Anyway.We’ve got to get you somewhere safe:

Izzy shook her head, shrugging off the hazy look on her

face:Anywhere there's fresh air, please. Is that why you've brought me to the seaside?'

'You tell me.What does it smell like here?'

Izzy took a cautious sniff, and frowned. 'It's still there, but it's weaker: She looked out across the rippling grey ocean,

the pale sun creeping down across the horizon and shattering into silver slivers on the distant waves. 'The breeze is coming in from the sea, too. It smells a little fresher out there:

'Good. Because that's precisely where we're going:

Izzy took a quick look about:But we haven't got a boat or anything.And, where would we go?'

'First of all, we don't need a boat:The Doctor took a few steps towards , the waves breaking softly against the shore.At the water's edge, there was , a small platform of what looked like concrete, standing a couple of feet taller than the sand.The waves foamed around it, splashing spots of frothy spray onto its surface. 'I just hope that this still works,' he muttered to himself, as Izzy joined him, a puzzled look on her face.

'What is it?' Izzy asked, watching as the Doctor stepped up onto the structure. He crouched down, and put his hand into a deep indentation on its surface.

'A door,' he replied, and his hand brushed the cold metal of a concealed handle. With some effort, he twisted it and, with a hiss of air and hum of machinery, a section of the top of the platform began to slide aside. The Doctor leapt off, and let the hatch open completely. It revealed a concrete tube leading straight down, with a metal ladder bolted on to its side.

'How is going underground going to get us out to sea?' Izzy asked, staring inquisitively down the tunnel.

'Because,' said the Doctor, smiling, It doesn't just go down. Look out

there, Izzy:

He pointed to a small, low, grey lump among the waves. It was surrounded by a pale red blur in the water; like some sort of ink stain, it was undulating under the movement of the ocean, but it was neither spreading nor being washed away by the tide.

Izzy squinted against the sun. ‘What is it?’

‘A maintenance farm,’ the Doctor said.’And a power station.The red stuff is algae, and it’s all linked by biofilaments - genetically engineered chains of a sister-algae - to that structure in the centre. It harvests the power from the algae, and sends it onshore. And it’s also where the power farmers work, ensuring that the algae is cared for and kept in tip- top condition’

‘And that tunnel is the only way in?’

‘Absolutely. That farm is about a mile away, give or take, and this tunnel follows the sea bed, bringing us out in the main power cells beneath the habitable part of the structure.The algae is too thick to make an approach by boat: it would just clog up anything that tried to push through it. And, more importantly for you and me, if our grimy friends do manage to use the tunnel to follow us, it’s a path we can easily defend’

Izzy looked unsure. ‘I don’t think I can face a night of fighting off the advance of the living dead’

‘Well,’ said the Doctor, trying to force a reassuring smile on to his face, ‘hopefully, it won’t come to that’ He hoisted himself up onto the platform, and took a few steps down the ladder. ‘Come along, Izzy. The sooner we get there, the safer we’ll be’

She shrugged, and climbed down after him.

The Doctor had made sure the hatch was closed tightly behind them and, after only a couple of minutes’ walk in the cold, damp air of the tunnel, Izzy was already beginning to feel much more like her old self.There was still a vague taint of the hideous smell around

her, but she got the sense that it was more like the stench of cigarettes you'd get on your clothes after a night in a smoky pub. She didn't like the idea of carrying the smell with her, but at least it was better than the constant nasal battery she'd left behind.

The corridor was long, leading off in front of her as far as she could see. The walls were a damp concrete, discoloured here and there by obvious leaks that the Doctor had told her not to worry about. Every few metres, a faint red light was set into the wall, casting a queasily devilish glow over the Doctor as he paced quickly ahead of her. He'd explained that the lights were cells of bioluminescent fungi, and Izzy's wonder at this world's marriage of biology and technology grew even deeper.

The algae power beds, the sensitive engineering of the farmlands, the biologically based superprocessors... and now this!

'I mean,' she had said, somewhat breathless with amazement, 'no light bulbs, no plugs - limitless, free illumination!'

'Izzy: the Doctor had chided, 'they're only lights.

Even so, as she walked on, her concentration now free of having to fight off the appalling stink, she couldn't help but begin to slip into awe at the advances she had seen on the planet. No wonder the Doctor had been so keen to bring her here.

But she also began to worry about something else...

'Doctor,' she began, 'if these people are so clever, what on earth could have happened to them to turn them into the mindless creatures in the fields?'

'Mindless, Izzy?' the Doctor replied, not moderating his pace. 'I don't think they're mindless at all.'

'What do you mean? They were one step away from chanting, "Brains! Brains!"'

'They may have looked like zombies from the movies, but their

behaviour was far more complex.Ah!' He suddenly stopped, and turned to look at her, grinning. 'Look:

He was pointing along the corridor, and Izzy could see a grey metal door blocking their path a couple of dozen metres ahead. 'Is that it? The way in?'

'It should be,' said the Doctor. 'We've been going long enough by now.' He starting walking again, picking up his pace. 'Those people,' he continued, 'behaved a little *like* people. One little girl was upset that I'd spoilt her game by dragging you out of there, and one of the women stopped to comfort her.That's not very George A. Romero, is it?'

'I suppose not: Izzy admitted. 'And they communicated.'

'What? Like, talked?'

'Yes. A proper language. Well, proper *words,* at least. There was only a vague sense of grammar. One of them identified me as a stranger, and then called his compatriots to help him stop me: The Doctor hustled to a halt outside the metal door and began to turn the circular handle set into its surface. 'The only thing was, he was talking very quietly, and the others were almost certainly too far away to hear what he said.And yet, they still responded.'

The door popped open with a hiss of air, and Izzy heard an electric hum from the other side. She peered over the Doctor's shoulder, but there was only more dim red light beyond.

The Doctor held out his hand, offering Izzy the lead into the unknown. Thanking him, she stepped over the door frame and into a tall, cylindrical room. More of the fungi-lights were hung here and there, giving a blood red wash to the immense space. Her footsteps echoed off a metal walkway that quartered the space between four tall, blank metal structures. Each of these were emanating the low hum she'd heard from outside. The sound made her slightly uncomfortable, giving her a feeling of pressure around her temples. She pointed at one of the structures and asked the Doctor, 'What are they?'

‘Batteries. Mass storage of electricity, ready to be piped back to the mainland. Don’t worry about the buzz. It’s only harmful if the exposure is over a long period.’ He jogged to overtake her, and took the left turning at the crossroads in the centre of the room. A-ha! There it is.’

‘There what is?’ asked Izzy, as she walked to join him

‘The way up.’

It was another metal ladder, leading up into nothing but darkness. ‘You’re sure about that?’

‘Absolutely. Come on, we’re nearly there. The Doctor began to climb, and Izzy briefly marvelled at his energy. She’d been walking all day now, and the thought of this last ascent made her legs ache. Still, he was right. Safety was at the top of that ladder, and that was the more important thing to her right now Steeling herself for the climb, she lifted a foot on to the first rung.

‘That’s not right.’

Looking up, she saw the Doctor leaning dangerously out from the ladder, holding on with just one hand. His other hand was poking into a panel on the wall, from which a thick cable snaked out and into the side of one of the batteries.

‘What’s not?’ she shouted up to him

‘The algae’s biofilaments have been realigned. They’re no longer connected to the power grid.They’re…’ He fiddled with something on the panel and tutted. ‘Every single one has been re-routed to the complex above us. Strange. They’re not designed for that kind of mass repositioning. The odd one or two, certainly, for routine maintenance, but -’

‘Doctor,’ sighed Izzy.

‘Yes?’

‘I’m getting a headache down here. Could we just get a move on?’

With one last sideways glance at the panel, the Doctor nodded. ‘Of course:

Deezer watched the two of them climb, the picture flickering across his monitor. He reached to a small movepad with his right hand, and repositioned the camera so he could get a better look. One man, and a ‘ younger woman. Clothed, conscious and clearly not affected by the Syntax. But how?

‘ His fingers danced across his keyboard to run a quick crossref with the population database. It had taken him a little over a month to hack into it, but who was going to arrest him for that crime now? There were no records of their existence anywhere on Jora.

A panicked thought caught him in its steely grip and he pressed a few more keys to run a molecular scan. There was a trace of the Syntax’s xemes on their clothing but, like a novel put through a shredder, it was disconnected and without sense. Just dead words.

He brushed the movepad, and zoomed in on the genedata. The sequencing was all wrong. Their genomes were completely unrecognisable.

Definitely aliens.

Jora had had few visitors over the last two years. The odd concerned survey ship - or money-grubbing junker craft - had touched down during , the first year, but the Syntax always consumed them within hours. Since I most of these visitors had been from around the same sector of the Ellemede Galaxy, they had shared relatively similar genetic coding with ‘the Jorans. Certainly enough of a similar sequence to allow the Syntax to take control of their bodies.

These new visitors, though, were something different. Even the shape , of their DNA was wrong. These were the most alien aliens he had ever , seen. So where had they come from?

He'd had the computers routinely monitor shipping transmissions from around the system, and was pleased to discover that most of Ellemede 'considered the planet out of bounds. As far as he could tell from the 'lightwave chatter, the general consensus was that Jora had been consumed by some sort of planet-wide plague. Not far wrong.

Jora had been quarantined. Perfect. Just as it should be.

No one had tried to land on the planet for just over a year, but now there was this odd couple... He zoomed out from their genedata for a better look. They didn't seem to be a rescue team, nor did they have the acquisitive gleam in their eyes that would identify them as junkers.Their strange clothes, relaxed manner. None of it made sense.

With one last check of the molecular scan, to reassure himself that they were free of active xemes, he stood up from his console and walked to the door. On his way, he picked up his gun from the table by his bed. If they *did* carry the Syntax, then he'd have to kill them He wasn't taking any chances.

At the top of the ladder, Izzy leant over, bracing herself with her hands on her knees, and struggled to catch her breath. The Doctor had walked a little further on, and was busy opening the next - and, she hoped, final -door between her and safety. He spoke as he worked.

'So, as I was saying, they obviously had some method of communication that was verbal and *not* verbal.They had to use words, but it didn't seem necessary to be able to hear them.'

'Or,' Izzy panted, her breath slowly coming back to her, 'maybe they've just got very good hearing.'

'Unlikely. If their hearing was that good, why didn't they react to our approach earlier? Ah!' There was a click and the Doctor, smiling, pushed against the door.

And anyway, Izzy,' he continued, his shoulder heaving against the heavy metal door, 'there's *obviously* something more going on.Their behaviour, your symptoms... What *is* wrong with this door?'

'What do you want?'

'To open the door, Izzy,' said the Doctor with another shove. 'I would have thought that was obvious.'

'That wasn't me, Doctor.' Izzy looked all around for the source of the voice. It was male, and had sounded a little distorted. 'There you go,' she said, pointing at a small speaker grill to one side of the door.

'Oh!' The Doctor stepped back and spoke into the panel housing the speaker. 'Hello, there. We weren't expecting

anyone to be in. I'm the Doctor, and this is my friend Izzy, and we -'

'Answer the question. What do you want?'

'To come in' The Doctor had lowered his voice, and sounded a little angry. For someone who was so easily bored, he was never good with people as impatient as himself.

There was a brief pause, then a crackle from the speaker. When the man's voice came back, it sounded sharp and unfriendly. 'Why?'

The Doctor rolled his eyes and sternly replied, 'Look, if you just let us in, we can all have a nice cup of tea and -'

'What my friend means to say,' interrupted Izzy, 'is that we need somewhere safe to hide out. We didn't know that you'd be here, and we're sorry if we're trespassing or anything like that, but we really do need to come in, and we promise not to hurt you or break anything or steal anything, but - please - I've had just about enough of trudging over zombie fields and running down tunnels and climbing ladders, and I need to sit down and to eat, and we're no threat at all. In fact, we're very lovely people, so, please, please, just open the door and let us in'

The Doctor was staring wide-eyed at her. No doubt he was appalled that she'd hijacked his tactful diplomacy with a protracted whinge. In fact, he opened his mouth to say something but was thankfully stopped in his tracks by another crackle from the speaker.

'Right. Come in, and close the door behind you. Stay in the decon chamber until I open the inner door and let you out. Got that?'

'Got it,' sighed Izzy, relief coursing through her body and dragging a wave of tiredness behind it.

With a low whirring, the door finally opened to reveal a brightly lit, white chamber. There were benches on either side, flanking what must ; have been the inner door, and Izzy strode past the Doctor and gratefully slumped onto one of them, closing her eyes and letting her head loll back against the wall.

'Izzy,' the Doctor began, 'I do wish you'd leave the talking to -'

'Just get inside, you great twit, and do as the man says'

After a few blissful minutes of quiet nothing, during which the Doctor had pointedly not talked to her (fine by her!), Izzy heard a mechanical hum. She opened her eyes and saw the inner door slowly opening. She glanced 'across at the Doctor, smiling, and winked. He just thinned his lips and raised a piqued eyebrow. 'Oh, come on, Doctor,' she whispered. 'I got us in, didn't I?'

'This situation required calm and measured negotiation,' he hissed, 'and you just opened a verbal floodgate and battered the poor man into submission.You could have damaged any useful working relationship that may have devel- '

'Bright side,' Izzy snapped, nodding her head towards the now-open door.

In the doorway stood a tall, thin man, dressed in ill-fitting grey overalls. His hair was long and messy: it certainly hadn't seen scissors this side of his thirtieth birthday. His eyes, bloodshot and a

little wild, darted between Izzy and the Doctor as he quickly tried to size them up. In his right hand, hovering not very discreetly at his hip, he held a gun. He shifted his grip on the weapon, then visibly swallowed.

‘You’re clean,’ he said, then gestured with the gun for them to enter. The Doctor bounded to his feet and stepped past the man, wandering off to look about. Izzy found standing up to be more of an ordeal, her tired muscles complaining at every movement.The man pocketed the gun and stepped forward to help her, sliding an arm under hers.

‘Thanks,’ said Izzy.

As he leant over to help her stand, his overall hung open at his neck and a pendant slipped out. Attached to a chain around his neck was a small glass cylinder, with a pale yellow liquid sloshing around inside it.

‘That’s unusual,’ said Izzy, pointing to it.

He made no reply. Instead he quickly pushed the pendant back beneath his overall, and led her past the door and into a gleaming, white corridor. Everything - walls, floor and ceiling - looked like it was made of plastic, and there were no proper corners anywhere. Everything was round and smooth, and absolutely pristine.

‘You must do a lot of hoovering,’ murmured Izzy, appreciatively.

‘Excuse me?’ said the man. ‘Housework?’ Izzy tried. ‘I mean, it’s very clean in here’

‘Of course it is.’ The man sounded surprised. ‘The farm is tended by sterrites.’

‘What?’

‘Sterilising nites?’

‘I’d never go to sleep!’ Izzy gasped.

‘What?’

‘Who wants to be sterilised at night?’

‘What?’ The man peered at her with narrowed eyes. ‘Zyme replicators on the surface of the nites ensure that no xemes can survive within the farm.The sanitec regulators reintegrate the nites when their zymes are no longer reactive and apply a catalytic coating to burn off the xemes. It means I go through a lot of nites

‘I can imagine.

but the place is completely xeme-free’

Izzy stared at the man for a second, then nodded. ‘It’s funny,’ she said, slowly and carefully, ‘normally I can understand just about anything anyone says. One of the benefits of travel-by-TARDIS, the Doctor says. But what you just said makes no sense at all. I’m sorry.’

She smiled, and was relieved to see the man smile back.

‘You’re not a scientist, then?’ he asked.

‘Not in the tiniest, slightest little bit’

‘I’m sorry. I just assumed...’ He looked about himself. ‘All you need to know is, I keep the place clean using microscopic biobots. Oh, you do know what a -’

‘A biological robot’

‘Precisely. I’m Deezer, by the way. And you must be Izzy. I’m sorry I don’t get many visitors.’

‘Well,’ said the Doctor, who, having finished poking around all the corners in sight, had returned to their side, ‘in that case, we’re honoured, Mr Deezer:

Deezer looked a little unsure, but there was something like joy

hovering behind his eyes. ‘Thank you, Doctor. Come with me. Let me show you to my quarters:

Izzy had gratefully flopped onto the bed the minute she’d been led into the room. She was now propped up against some wonderfully soft ;pillows, watching Deezer show the Doctor around the control console. one two of them had been talking for a few minutes about the working of the algae beds, and Izzy had been curiously watching the Doctor dance around the big issue.Why was Deezer the only halfway normal person on this planet?

Deezer, too, had seemingly relished the chance to natter on about the delicate work involved in tending to the algae. It was almost as if it was a relief to talk about anything but what must have been at the front of his mind.Why were Izzy and the Doctor the only halfway normal people on this planet?

Well. She looked at the Doctor. In his case, quarter-way normal.

This, she supposed, must be the Doctor’s much-vaunted diplomacy. If she’d had more energy herself, she probably would have waded straight in and asked about the smell and the zombies. But, enjoying luxuriating on the firm springs of the mattress, and the warm down of the pillows cushioning her head, she was happy just to listen...

‘And this; said Deezer, moving his hand to a flat silver pad to one side of the keyboard,’is how we examine and align the biofilaments. If I just...’ With practised skill, he stroked the pad and the image that floated in the above the desk shimmered and reconstructed itself into a web of red

‘That; explained Deezer, waving his hands through the intangible *men, ‘is the line-up of all the algae filaments themselves, and this...’ Another brush on the pad and the image spiralled dizzily, different red lines leaping to the fore. Pretty, thought Izzy. ‘These are the biofilaments themselves.They’re, ah, aligned for maintenance at the moment:

Izzy furrowed her brow - just a little: energy was precious and she

wanted to say awake. She might not have a clue what Deezer was talking about, but that was an out-and-out lie. Even if the Doctor hadn't already mentioned that this biofilament business was unusual, it was obvious that Deezer was getting a little uncomfortable with this topic.

'But enough of that; he said, breezily, waving a hand over the pad. The :Image blinked out of existence. I expect you're hungry.

I'll just go and get some food.'

Smiling, Deezer stood up and left the room.

The Doctor slid into his chair and gave Izzy a quick wink, raising a finger to his lips. 'I don't expect he thinks I'm skilled enough to operate [Text missing]

'What?' Izzy rubbed her eyes, dragging herself to her feet. 'But we've only just arrived, and I really need to -'

'No time!' barked the Doctor. Whatever's happening out there on the mainland, this man, Deezer... He did it. It's his fault!' 'Deezer?' He'd looked so wet. 'How can one man do that to a whole society?'

'I'm not sure,' said the Doctor. He took her hand and led her out of the ,room, checking carefully that Deezer was nowhere to be seen. As he pulled her along the corridor towards the exit, he explained, 'But he's developed some sort of mind-control agent, something to switch off the bits of the brain that make a person a person, the things that give them life:

They had stopped at a junction, and the Doctor was frantically peering round the corner, trying to decide which way to go. Izzy's attention, meanwhile, was taken with a much more pressing issue. An issue pressing into the base of her spine.

'This xemetic agent,' the Doctor continued, 'he's going to release it. It's at biological weapon.'

'Doctor,' said Izzy.

‘We’ve got to break the biofilaments, stop the release of the agent, and make sure...’The Doctor had turned back to face Izzy. His face fell.

Izzy heard Deezer’s voice drift over her shoulder, and knew that what she could feel was the barrel of his gun against the small of her back:You don’t understand, Doctor.The xemetic agent is not a weapon.’

‘But it’s designed to kill!’ he gasped, stepping forward.

Izzy felt the gun pushed more firmly into her back. ‘Doctor,’ she warned. Please, just calm down.’ ‘You’re wrong,’ said Deezer, calmly. ‘It’s designed to cure.’

They were sitting in the galley, a room as shining white and clean as everything else on the farm. There were windows along one side of the room, and they looked out onto the night. The twin moons of the planet cast a pale glow against the window frames, broken now and again by a splash of ocean spray against the glass. Deezer had brought them their promised food, and sat them at one end of a long table. He seated himself at the far end, his gun lying in plain sight next to his plate of food.

The Doctor was just playing with his meal, refusing even to look at their captor, while Izzy was shovelling the last forkful appreciatively into her Mouth. Deezer ate his own meal, not taking his eyes off either of them for a second. If it hadn’t been for the welcome relief of food at last, Izzy would have found the silence uncomfortable. No one had spoken since Deezer bad led them here, his gun never moving from Izzy’s back.

Swallowing down hard on her final, over-large mouthful, Izzy suppressed a belch and dropped her fork onto her plate with a clatter. ‘Thank you,’ she said.

Deezer just nodded, gently placing his own fork next to his half-finished meal.

[Text Missing]

also in the pay of one of the larger cosmetic companies on Jora. Not that he ever declared it.And I only kept quiet about it because he would slip me extra money if I aided him in some extra-curricular work. Anyway, when this company got wind of the pheromones - no pun intended - ‘,they were very interested in their application in fragrances. I mean, who wouldn’t want a perfume that made people crazy with the desire to sleep with you?

‘So, Manser recoded the pheromones to work on ordinary Jorans. The cosmetic company were delighted with the results and began to prepare for mass production, but Manser, meanwhile, had began to think of another application. The coding he had already carried out was merely chemical - altering the molecular chains of the weevils’ pheromones to translate their “language” into a form understandable by Jorans. What Manser now had in mind was a *genetic* recoding of the pheromones of Joran themselves. I mean, most living creatures - animals, at least - have the things, so, Manser reasoned, there must logically be a way of coding our genetics to give us conscious control over what chemical signals we were releasing.

‘But still, that wasn’t enough for him The next logical step was to alter the ability to control pheromones to the degree where more complex messages could be broadcast, even to the point where a person’s ‘chemical signals’ could be so precisely coded that they would only be Interpreted by a particular other person. Manser worked to create a form of chemical telepathy, and took the idea of a pheromone language to its rational conclusion.A *real* language.

He altered the stickiness of the molecular chains, introduced new pheromone building blocks - xemes, he called them - and paved the way for proper, two-way, linguistic communication via these engineered biochemicals. But he couldn’t have known what would happen next:

Deezer’s chin fell against his chest, and Izzy heard him sniff back a tear. ‘The pheromones evolved, didn’t they?’ said the Doctor. ‘That’s what saw in your files, but I didn’t realise what it meant.’

Deezer nodded, then looked back up at them. His eyes were ringed with red. ‘Yes. Manser had introduced complexity to the chemicals to such a degree that this new pheromone language could self-complicate at an astonishing rate. The language became a living thing, a living expression of the capabilities that had been engineered into it. It even became Sentient:

‘Sentient?’ asked Izzy. ‘How can you be sure?’

‘The technology we developed to engineer the pheromones had to include a way of measuring their linguistic responses, of course. Using the ccomputer in my quarters, I can eavesdrop on its conversation. It’s even given itself a name ‘

‘Syntax,’ breathed the Doctor.

[Text missing]

‘Well, that’s hardly the point,’ said Izzy, shifting in her chair.

‘It’s *precisely* the point,’ the Doctor countered. ‘You said that I’d just dragged you out of somewhere you felt safe, somewhere you were *happy.’*

‘But I’m not Joran,’ Izzy noted.

‘But if the Jorans don’t share those same feelings, what possible purpose would it serve the Syntax?’

‘What do you mean?’ Deezer asked, his eyes narrowing.

The Syntax is clearly keeping its Joran hosts, firstly, well fed. It has left them with a degree of social interaction: remember the little girl comforted by the woman? Such interaction serves a very useful purpose In the animal kingdom, nurturing feelings of belonging, protection, basic tribal feelings. Look at chimpanzees!’

‘Chimpanzees?’ yelled Izzy. This thing has brought these people down to the level of monkeys, and you’re *celebrating* it?’

‘Don’t underestimate chimps,’ said the Doctor, a little taken aback. Jane Goodall proved that chimpanzees have a form of culture, and that it could spread -’

‘Oh, don’t Jane Goodall me,’ Izzy spat. That woman! She proved nothing other than that chimpanzees would do anything for their daily banana!’

‘What I’m trying to say,’ said the Doctor, raising his voice, ‘is that -’

‘What you’re trying to say,’ snapped Deezer, ‘means nothing. You’re arguing over a moot point. At sunrise, the xemetic agent will be released into the atmosphere, and the Syntax will be destroyed’

Deezer stood and, with one last look at the open-mouthed Doctor, walked out of the room.

As he stomped back to his quarters, Deezer tried to calm down. How dare that man try to lecture him about the Syntax? What right did he have to start judging a situation he knew nothing about?

Deezer had worked for every day of the last two years to develop a chemical that would stop the Syntax in its tracks and, now he’d finally eked it, this Doctor had wandered in and started questioning the rights the creature that had enslaved his race! He’d even tried to suggest his people were *happy* with their new masters!

Not that it mattered any more.A few days ago, he’d finalised the formula for the xemetic agent, and programmed the algae to replicate and release it during photosynthesis. Deezer had got very lucky. Jora’s sun was about to enter a period of unusually violent solar flare activity. In fact, the other side of the planet was already benefiting from the fractionally increased cts of solar radiation When tomorrow dawned over the algae farm, the farms’ photosynthesis would kick into overdrive and start pumping out the agent.

With a good following breeze, it would be a matter of minutes before

[Text missing]

'This is ridiculous; the Doctor raged, staring out of the window across the dark blue sea. 'Crazy! He's going to murder a whole new life form:

[Text missing]

‘But that niche is the people of this world!’

And are they unhappy about that?’The Doctor’s voice was even, and his stare had turned into a questing, almost encouraging, gaze.

Izzy knew where this was going, of course, but she wasn’t going to be railroaded towards an answer just because it was the one the Doctor wanted.

‘Izzy? Were you unhappy?’

‘No: she said, quietly, ‘but -’

‘What was it like? Really? What did you feel?’

Izzy’s face involuntarily flinched as she began to think about the short moment at which she had fallen totally into the Syntax. She knew she was no longer herself, no longer a human individual, and it had made her frightened, but... ‘It wasn’t lonely,’ she said, casting her eyes down and away from his. It felt like some shameful admission, but that was only because it had felt so *nice*. ‘I knew that I’d become part of something larger, and that all the other parts of it - of me - cared for me, and wanted me to be loved:

‘And the Syntax itself. Could you feel that?’

‘I knew there was something else, something... above me, that valued me and wanted to keep me safe.’ Are you still sure you don’t believe in God?’ the Doctor asked with a smirk.

‘Don’t be daft,’ she laughed. ‘It’s just a biochemical life form, isn’t

it?'

'Yes. But, once you're inside it, one you become part of its host, it obviously does something to your mind: The Doctor glanced back out of the window:I wouldn't be surprised if, at whatever level the Jorans are still capable of reasoning about such things, that's how they view the Syntax.

'The Jorans have devolved to the intellectual level of primates, maybe even that of a primitive human-like tribe, but they still exhibit many of the things that would be enough to qualify them for what you would call 'humanity. Emotions, a sense of belonging and of kinship, an understanding of their own value as individuals as well as part of a Community, and - of course - language.'

The Doctor made it sound anything but the horrifying picture Deezer bad painted. 'So,' she asked, 'what exactly are you saying?'

'Above all, Izzy, I believe they're happy.' He paused and took her hand in his. 'And can you really say that you disagree?' 'No,' she said. 'No, but -'

'It was an accident.'

Izzy sighed. 'And that's life?'

'Not if Deezer has his way. But I've got an idea.'

The Doctor let go of her hand and strode to the door of the galley. come on.'

Izzy followed, walking round the table, then stopped as she noticed something on the tabletop. 'Hang on, Doctor,' she said. 'Deezer forgot his gun.'

The Doctor looked down at the weapon, his brow deepening over his face. 'Bring it,' he said, his voice hard as granite. 'We might need it'

Happy that everything was in place and working correctly, Deezer

used the movepad to pull out from the image of the biofilaments. He motioned in to the computer's main systems and checked the time. Dawn was only a matter of hours away. Time to activate the xemetic agent.

He opened file after file, and uploaded the data along the main power feed. Then he opened the feed onto the biofilaments. The data was converted from binary information to genetic code as it passed through the power gate and into the algae beds. He watched a new map of the biofilaments forming, as the DNA of each one altered to carry the agent.

Within just a few seconds, the whole field of algae pulsed with the new genetic data. He flickered his hand over the movepad, and the image started a slow spiral so he could check every last inch.The first stage had been a success: the algae had been completely re-engineered.

Smiling to himself, he scraped the movepad and brought up an image of the maintenance systems. There, at the heart of it, was a tight knot of biofilaments, where they had all been realigned to accept their new orders. He zoomed in on the knot and tapped the movepad once, briskly.

A brief flash appeared at the centre of the screen and he watched, content, as the biofilaments broke away from the maintenance housing and drifted away into the water.

He zoomed in further, until the housing itself was the only thing on the screen. A few more flicks of the wrist, and he focused a feedback surge from the power gate on that spot.A warning message appeared, which he quickly dismissed with another wave over the movepad. Then, with a bright red flash, a malfunction read-out scrolled across the centre of the screen.

Perfect. Now nothing could stop the algae replicating the xemetic agent, and his world would be free once more.

He allowed himself to relax for a moment, slumping awkwardly back into his chair and rubbing his eyes. But the peace didn't last

long.

‘You idiot, Deezer.’

He nearly fell off his chair in fright, spinning round to see the Doctor standing in the doorway, his friend peering over his shoulder. He noticed that she was now carrying a gun, so his hand automatically went to his pocket. But it was empty. His heart sank.

Izzy tugged at the knot once more and heard Deezer utter a quiet ‘ouch’.

‘Sorry,’ she said.At least she was sure now that he couldn’t get up. She had tied him to a chair using sheets from the bed, while the Doctor - adtnirably hiding his discomfort - had kept the gun trained on him.

No one had spoken for a few minutes, not since the Doctor had asked Deezer, ‘How long?’ for the five billionth time. Their scientist friend was remaining remarkably tight-lipped.

Izzy gave the Doctor a quick nod, which he returned. He passed the gun to her, offering her an apologetic look as he did so. She just shrugged, sat on the bed, and idly held the gun out towards Deezer’s back. His chair was facing the screen, too, so all three of them had a perfect view as the Doctor set about trying to work out exactly what Deezer had done. Thanks to his earlier root through the files, and Deezer’s more recent revelations, it didn’t take him long.

‘How can I stop the algae releasing the xemetic agent, Deezer?’ the Doctor asked not tearing his glare from the images dancing across the screen.

‘You can’t: spat Deezer. The maintenance housing is burnt out. Even with the fastest nites, it would take half a day to repair:

‘And we don’t have half a day, do we?’ Deezer remained silent.

Deezer,’ the Doctor repeated, ‘how long have we got?’

‘Come on, Deezer,’ Izzy added, leaning forward so her mouth was right next to his ear.’We won’t miss you, you know, and the Doctor can work it out, with or without you: She gently pushed the gun into his shoulder.

‘Thank you, Izzy,’ the Doctor said, ‘but I’m sure Mr Deezer is perfectly capable of making his own mind up:

‘About three hours,’ Deezer finally replied. ‘Check the time, if you like, but sunrise is due in a little over two and a half hours, and then it Shouldn’t take long for enough of the agent to be replicated so that it reaches the shoreline:

‘I see.’ The Doctor twirled his chair around so that he faced the computer again. His hands tripped over the controls, until a complicated series of formulae began to spill across the screen. He peered intently at them, occasionally humming or tutting to himself.

‘You won’t find any answers there: Deezer offered. ‘There aren’t any Answers left to find:

‘None except your final solution, I suppose,’ the Doctor muttered, Zooming in on a clump of particularly complex formulae.

‘What is all that, Doctor?’ Izzy asked.

Manser’s work: he explained. ‘The chemical formulae for the original creation of the pheromones that becaine the Syntax. Impressive stuff, but Nothing I can’t handle:

‘What do you mean?’ crowed Deezer. ‘Manser was an intellectual giant, one of the best regarded scientists on Jora:

‘Indeed he was. But even you - a humble junior - could make enough progress with his work to devise a formula to reverse his work.’

‘It took me two years!’

‘You admitted it yourself. You’re a junior, Deezer,’ the Doctor growled. He sat ramrod straight in the chair and laced together the fingers of both hands, cracking them into more nimble tools. ‘Now, let’s see what it’s like when a *real* expert is at the controls:

Deezer was about to make another complaint, but a jab from the barrel of the gun kept him quiet. Izzy watched over his shoulder as the images on the screen whirled and spun, zoomed in and out, broke apart and recombined. She rarely saw the Doctor really send his mind and body freewheeling like this, and it was a boggling sight.

After a few minutes, he leant back, gave one last push of air over the movepad, and giggled to himself ‘There,’ he said. ‘That’s it.’

‘What’s it?’ wondered Izzy, turning her head to see if a different angle made the twirling squiggles on the screen make any more sense.

‘Deezer’s right: the Doctor announced, turning the chair to face them again. ‘There really is nothing I can do to stop the algae producing the agent and releasing it into the air. But I can create the formula for an *anti*xemetic.And I have.’ He beamed with pride.

And how,’ mocked Deezer, ‘do you propose to get that into the atmosphere in time to combat the agent?’

‘I have something in mind.’ He looked strangely at Izzy. ‘Come on,’ he added, standing up. ‘Izzy, I need you to head back down to the battery array. Wait for me there. I won’t be long.’

‘What are you going to do?’ she asked.

‘I’ve programmed the computer to create a small sample of the antixemetic. It’ll take a couple of minutes before it’s ready. I’ll wait here for that, then catch you up.

‘And what about me?’ asked Deezer, struggling against his bonds.

‘You and I need to have a word: the Doctor said, lowering his voice and smiling sadly at him. ‘Go on, now, Izzy. Hurry up.

The climb down the ladder was a damn sight easier than the climb up. Ignoring the him from the batteries, Izzy had got to the bottom, and crossed the metal walkway to the door by which they entered. She opened it - she wasn’t sure, but she imagined the Doctor would want as quick a getaway as possible - and waited.

Deezer eyed the Doctor as he eagerly watched the computer monitor the creation of a batch of the new formula. He hadn’t said anything since Izzy had left, and Deezer was seriously beginning to wonder whether he was actually going to have that word or not.

He cleared his throat and asked, ‘What *are* you going to do with me?’ The Doctor suddenly became very still. ‘What do you want me to do?’

‘I want you to let me go, get out of here, and get off this planet. I want my world back, and you seem determined to stop me.’

‘I’in very much afraid to say that I am,’ the Doctor replied, giving him an apologetic look. ‘And I will. I’m sorry if that’s a blow.’

‘A blow?’ Deezer cried. ‘You’re condemning the Jorans to slavery.’
‘It’s not like that,’ the Doctor sighed, exasperated.

‘What is it like, then? We were the greatest scientists in the galaxy,’ he yelped. ‘Everyone looked to Jora as an example of the marriage of high technology with the finest living standards. We were respected, valued,

even feared. And now what? The rest of the universe thinks we’re dead, while I have to watch my fellow men carry out ‘the orders of some all-controlling life form!’

That’s not how it works. The Jorans

‘That’s *exactly* how it works, Doctor,’ Deezer spat.

‘No, it’s not!’ The Doctor was leaning down, and Deezer could feel his cold breath on his face. ‘Things have changed, certainly, but it’s not up to you to decide whether that change is for the better or not’

‘But how can you decide? They’re *my* people!’

‘No, they’re not’ There was a quiet bleeping from the computer. The Doctor turned and opened a panel on its surface, taking out a sinall ampoule filled with a milky white liquid. He turned back to face Deezer. ‘I know you’ll never understand, but the Syntax doesn’t deserve to die. And who knows, anyway, how far it has evolved already? Thanks to Manser’s engineering, it took several giant leaps in a matter of days. How much further could that have gone in the last two years? And how much further will it go? By now, the people of your world could be so tightly linked to its nurturing force that the death of the Syntax could mean the death of them. Do you *really* know that that’s definitely not the case?’

Deezer was silent, his mind numb with the idea. He’d never even considered the thought. No wonder he’d never been promoted beyond junior.

‘I’m going to go, now.’ The Doctor spoke in a cold and matter-of-fact tone.’Izzy was never a good little Brownie, so those knots probably won’t take you long to wriggle out of. But, by then, we’ll be long gone and, I promise you, the release of your xemetic agent won’t make the slightest bit of difference’

He walked to the door and stepped outside, before leaning back round the frame and adding,’I don’t know what you want to do now, Deezer, but think carefully about whatever it is you choose. I wish you the very best of luck’

The Doctor frowned. Then, he was gone.

* * *

‘Come on, Izzy

She’d been so wrapped up in trying to block out the nasty hum from

the batteries that she hadn't even heard the Doctor approach. He whisked past her, his coat tails flapping behind him, and into the corridor that led back to the beach. She jogged to catch up. 'Where's Deezer? What have you done with him?'

'Done with him?' the Doctor asked, a smile in his voice. 'Nothing. I just made one or two things a little clearer in his mind. I left the rest up to him.'

'You've been very good at that today,' Izzy said.

'Haven't I just?'

The Doctor quickened his pace still further, so that Izzy was having to almost run to keep up.'So, Doctor,' she said, breezily,'what's the plan? How are you going to get the anti-xemetic into the atmosphere?'

'Oh, I'm aiming for a much more targeted release than that. I want the anti-xemetic to get right into the Syntax. There's no way it will work in time, otherwise:

'And how on earth are you going to do that?' Izzy asked.'It's not like you can just jab a syringe into its arm:

The Doctor didn't reply. In fact, he didn't utter another word for the entire journey back through the corridor. As they finally reached the ladder back up to the surface, he placed one foot on a rung and turned to her. 'Ready, Izzy?'

'What for?'

'Saving the world.'

He climbed up the ladder and popped open the hatch. Pale moonlight burst through, and the sound of the waves filled the chamber.The Doctor disappeared onto the surface and Izzy began the climb. As her head cleared the hatch, she began to smell the unmistakable stench of the Syntax all around her - but a sound drifting on the breeze from the low sand dunes bordering the beach

demanded her attention.

It sounded like a woman screeching in pain.

The Doctor was already cautiously walking in the direction of the cries, so Izzy quickly followed him.

As she reached his side, he raised a finger to his lips and motioned for her to follow. He carefully climbed the dune, crouching down to stay out of sight. When they reached the summit, the two of them lay on their bellies in the whispering grass, which had been coloured a sandy pink by the moonlight. In a small valley between the dunes lay a woman, flat on her back, her face a picture of agony.At one side of her sat a young man, an anxious look on his face. At her other side sat an older woman, who cradled her head in her arms.

Quickly, Izzy realised what was happening and looked away. ‘She’s giving birth!’ she whispered.

The Doctor just nodded. Then, sliding backwards on his belly, so as to remain hidden, he moved back towards the beach.

Izzy, trying to ignore the woman’s anguish, quickly followed.

She rejoined him as he stood gazing out over the hills towards the dawn.A pale streak of blue light was unpeeling the night where it joined the land. ‘We haven’t got long; he said, reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket.

He pulled out an ampoule of white liqud.

‘Is that it?’ asked Izzy. ‘The anti-xemetic?’

The Doctor nodded, then looked at her, trying to smile. need you to do something for me, Izzy.Well, not just for me...’

Izzy looked at the ampoule, then up at the Doctor’s pleading face. He had to be kidding. But she knew he wasn’t. All right, then; said Izzy, clearing her throat. load me up.’

The Doctor stepped forward and raised the ampoule beneath Izzy's nose. She heard a faint crack, then another smell joined the sour stench in the air. It smelt a little sweet, almost like orange blossom. For a second, she remembered Fey's favourite perfume - something posh, from Penhaligon's in Covent Garden. Izzy had always wondered exactly what it was called...

She closed her eyes and smiled. She took a deep breath.

Later, the breeze was carrying the Syntax up the hillside again, its wholeness breaking around and through the trees and knots of whispering grass. A trailing arm spiralled upon itself, and then flicked up and into the air. A lump of scents, a collection of words, broke off and began to grow...

It knew there was something in the air around it, some other words. Poisonous words. But it had been untaught their language, told how to not listen to them. It had been warned, by a friend - a truefriend.

Truefriend wasn't just another language to be learnt, it wasn't just another place for the Syntax to talk. Truefriend was something else, something other. 'Life', it seemed, was a bigger word than 'Syntax'.

And now the Syntax knew about others, knew how to talk to them (without stealing their words away.And it knew that truefriend had made it possible for the Syntax to continue and hopefully, one day, make more truefriends.

The Syntax found the words for laughter, then carefully wrote them onto the warm, twisting winds.

When she came round, Izzy was lying outside the TARDIS, an oxygen mask held over her nose and mouth by an uncomfortable piece of elastic. She had no idea how long had passed, but the sun was now casting long, faint shadows across the dusty ground. She blinked twice, and then tried to focus.The Doctor was standing over her, grinning.

'I know what you're going to ask,' she said, 'and the answer is yes'

‘It worked?’

‘It changed, I know that much’

Izzy sat up and rearranged the mask to a more snug position, shifting the elastic, which was cutting into her cheek. ‘It greeted me like an old friend, Doctor.’

‘Well, there would have been quite a few familiar compounds in that formula I knocked up.’

‘It wasn’t just that,’ Izzy said. ‘It said thank you’

Deezer had walked down the seabed corridor, and out onto the beach. After the events of the night, he was tired and still numb from the Doctor’s words. He had sat cross-legged on the sand, the waves lapping at his knees. He was looking out, away from the mainland, towards the horizon.The first blue of dawn was fading, to be replaced by the creamy glow of the sun as it crept out of the night and over the hills behind him. He could feel its warmth against the back of his neck, and saw his pale shadow spread long ahead of him, troubled here and there by the movement of the waves.

He unzipped his overall, and felt the cold sea breeze push against his bare chest. It was this breeze that was keeping the brunt of the Syntax from getting to him, pushing it back inland, but he was already aware of the tickle at the edge of his mind that meant it knew he was there.

He knew that the sea breeze would soon start carrying the xemetic agent but, if the Doctor was right, it would be nothing more than a bunch of useless chemicals being buffeted by the wind. The increased photosynthetic activity he had programmed the algae to undertake would kill it off in a couple of days, and then all of his work really would have been for nothing.

Deezer reached inside his open overall and pulled out the vial. The sample he’d grabbed as he ran from the lab, thinking, perhaps, it

would prove useful in their continued research. Idiot.

With a sharp tug, the chain around his neck broke and he brought the glass tube up to his face. He looked closely at it, watched the horizon distorted through the liquid sloshing around inside.

The Doctor, while convincing, had been definitely wrong about one thing.

They *were* his people.

He unscrewed the lid and took a deep breath.

Primitives
John Seavey

Jessica Copeau didn't need the alarm clock to wake up any more. The strident yammer of the fault indicator woke her up every bit as reliably, and far more frequently. She rubbed sleep from her eyes, brushed her short black hair into some semblance of order, pulled on a uniform and staggered out of her quarters to see what the problem was.

When she got to the Operations Centre, she found that Coordinator Sands had beaten her there yet again. Even worse, he looked parade perfect in his uniform. He had no hair to brush except for that little moustache of his, which probably saved him time, but she could see by the look in his eyes that he wanted to bring her up on charges of lateness. She knew she had a perfect excuse - her shift didn't start for another three minutes - but she knew that he'd find some sort of disciplinary code to write her up under. Probably Reg Twenty-Three, Failure to Respond to an Emergency. 'Never try to prove your boss wrong,' she muttered inaudibly, but the words didn't cross through the void of space and time to reach her six weeks ago, when they'd have done her some good.Worse yet, he gave her a look that suggested he'd heard her perfectly fine over the fault indicator.Adding a bit more volume, she asked,'What is it this time?'

James Sands input a string of commands into the computer:Looks like the monitors in Lab Four, the locks on Experimental Zone Fourteen, the purple frog... detectors? Oh, and the fault indicator.That explains that:

Jessica nodded. 'Yeah, the purple frog detectors are supposed to be failure-proof: Sands glared at her in return, which meant her joke would probably wind up under Reg Twenty-Two, Unprofessional Attitude. She Grabbed a tool kit. 'I'll go get Kelin and Strauss, get them to work on the monitors while I debug the locking systems. Unless you want me to re-check the fault indicator?'

Sands shook his head. No, I want you down in Zone Fourteen. That's one of your projects, and you'll be able to tell at a glance which specimens have escaped: Jessica noted that he no longer bothered using the word if: after a month of fruitless experimentation, even he'd started assuming pat the technical faults were accompanied by a loss of test subjects. I'll begin work up here on the fault indicator. Hopefully, I can get it on line quickly enough that it can help the three of you with your repairs:

Six months ago, at the beginning of the project, that would have been meant as a sincere offer of assistance. Six months of failure and frustration had done more than push them up to the edge of their deadline; it had also torn apart any kind of cohesion their team had once possessed. Sands, as Project Coordinator, claimed that someone was sabotaging the whole project. Depending on his mood, it was either elements within Trans-Planetary Mining that wanted to ensure they couldn't turn in a report of non-viability, or elements from soine other corporation that wanted to ensure they couldn't turn in a report at all. jessica had pointed to satellite telemetry that proved nobody but them had landed on the planet in the entire six- month span of the research project, but all it had gotten her were arguments, progressively worse duty assignments, and a sealed report that would probably torpedo her career.

As Sands continued to stare at her, Jessica realised she'd been woolgathering stress and lack of sleep, probably, wrecking her ability to concentrate and probably shortening her life span in small, but noticeable ways -

'Well?' Sands said, his face starting to redden.

Jessica shook her head to clear it, and grabbed a portable tool-kit: Sorry,' she said. 'I'll tell Kelin and Strauss.' She started down towards the labs, walking as quickly as possible to show her dedication... and, not incidentally, to keep Sands from getting in to any further conversation.

Erich Strauss rolled his eyes and noisily slurped his ersatz coffee as he stared out the observation port onto Planet Z02-80535. The fault indicators continued to bleep, but until someone came down to tell

him and Kelin what the problein was, they'd just continue their usual routine of coffee and arguments. He'd never understand why Mike even wound up working for TPM if all he ever did was try to run them out of business. He'd also never understand why he got stuck working the same duty shifts as Mike when all they ever did was drag up the same old arguments again.

'Look, Mike,' he said to Michael Kelin for what had to be the thousandth time in six months,'I'm as much a scientist as you are, and sure, I'm always up for the chance to study a new life form or two. But humans have been in space for hundreds of years now, and you know what we've found?' He pointed at the observation port, directing Mike's attention to a circling bird:The birds on these "strange new worlds" are pretty much just like the birds back on Earth. It's convergent evolution. Sure, the ones on this planet spit acid on our capture drones, but they're probably the same basic bird type:A bug buzzed idly at the port, sticking its proboscis out at the transparisteel in an effort to search for food. 'See? Same carapace structure, same instinct to drill into trees to search for food - even if the trees around here are weird mushroom things. Unless we find sentient life that can actively ask us not to mine, there's no big loss here:

Mike came right back with the same old response:I can't believe you're able to say that with a straight face while you look out the observation ports.This is an irreplaceable planet, Erich, full of millions of species of life forms we haven't even begun to study.There's enough biodiversity on this world to keep a thousand scientists occupied for a thousand years, and all you want to do is six months of checks to make sure there's no sentient inhabitants before you strip-mine it down to the core.'

Erich swallowed the last of his coffee:But nobody's going to miss those things when they're gone, Mike. It's not like those slug-things we caught last week have other slug-things at home putting up notices that say, "Missing: Bob Slug-Thing, last seen in company of two big bipedal things with nets", is it? The other slug-things just notice that there's more food and less competition for mating, and that's pretty much it.'

Mike sighed:You don't know that. I don't know that. Six months on this planet, and we still don't know anything about the life on it... and in twenty-four hours, there won't be anything to know anymore. Because we'll have started killing it all. It's too soon. It's homicidally, genocidally too soon!'

'You know what Jim said, Mike. He sent a report on the sabotage to Central, and Central agreed that it was probably sabotage by rivals. We're moving in to press our claiin, because the alternative isn't happy, peaceful slug-things dancing in glades of weird mushroom-things. The alternative is the planet getting mined anyway, but by someone else. I'm not thrilled by it either. I'd rather we did our job, did it right, and made sure. But after six months, we should know if there's anyone with any brains around here. Except for the guys wrecking our work, I mean'

'That's only if you believe Sands's theory. Jessica says -'

Just then, the door slid open and both of them looked over, expecting Jessica to walk in and tell them what needed fixing, along with giving them another earful of exactly what her theory was. Instead, two total strangers walked in, with Jessica close behind them.

The strangers weren't the weirdest people he'd ever seen, but six months of isolation with just each other for company made it seem that way.The man had a huge nose, a shock of grey hair and a face lined with wrinkles, and the oddest outfit Erich had ever seen. It looked like some sort of antique fancy-dress get-up, the kind of thing they wore back in the 1900s: all frills and ruffles, and even a velvet-lined cape. The girl was dressed in her own anachronistic outfit, with wide, flared collars and 'trousers that flared out similarly at the ankles, but she was much younger... quite a looker, in fact, with dark brown hair and the widest, most expressive eyes he'd seen outside of a cartoon character. Right now, they were expressing fear: Jessica was using the laser torch from her tool kit as an improvised gun, and pointing it at the both of them.

'I can't believe this,' she said as she walked in. 'Six months of telling Sands he's crazy, and on the day before our report is due, I find our

saboteurs jimmying the airlocks to get in! He's never going to let me forget this one.' She nodded her head at Kelin, keeping her hand steadily pointed at the two saboteurs. 'Go get him, will you? He deserves the chance to gloat in person, and I don't want these two outnumbering me'

Strauss almost wanted to laugh when Kelin dashed off. Six months of pointing to useless satellite readings instead of coming up with useful ideas, and now the two of them were finally finding out the truth... But the strangeness of the situation just seemed to shock him into silence.

The woman started to turn, but the man put his hand on her shoulder gently and she continued facing away from Jessica. listen,' she said, 'we're not saboteurs! How can we be? We've only just arrived on this planet!'

Jessica's face tightened. 'We've been watching the orbital buoys for six months. If any spaceship had gotten within a light year of this planet, we'd know about it.That's what I've been telling them, anyway.'

The girl looked... not guilty, but flustered, at least. 'Our ship's not a normal ship.You wouldn't have detected it But we did just get here!' She was turning now, just a little, trying to engage eye contact with Jessica without making any threatening movements.

The man spoke now for the first time. Now, Sarah Jane,' he said, smiling. 'They can't exactly take our word for it, can they?' His smile suggested a friendly understanding of the situation, but his tone gave the smile a spin of contempt. We've been treated like this before, it hinted, and every time it was by people just as paranoid and stupid as you. Strauss wanted to get angry at the arrogant jerk, but he couldn't help admiring his attitude. Kind of funny, getting caught red-handed and then getting high and mighty with the people that caught you.

It seemed to work on Jessica, though. She lowered the torch just a little, and asked, 'You can prove your story?'

The older man turned, but something in the way he did it made it seem unthreatening. Erich pegged the guy for a con artist as well as a saboteur. ‘Actually, we might be able to solve your problem. You said something about sabotage?’

Jessica nodded warily, but before she could say anything, Erich spoke up. ‘Don’t tell him anything,jess. The more you tell the guy, the more he can say without letting it slip that he knows the score.We’ll just show him the latest incident, and see how he and his accomplice react’ The girl glared daggers at him for that last sentence, but Erich couldn’t tell whether it was because she was guilty or indignant. Didn’t matter, though. She was even prettier when she was angry.

Just then, Kelin came racing back into the room, with Jim right behind him. Kelin was too out of breath to do too much talking, but Jim had only run half the distance Mike had, and still had plenty of breath to yell with. ‘So, these are the ones, eh? Good job, Copeau. Looks like you finally saw things my way after all, and at just the right time.We’ll notify Central, and they can get the truth out of these two - find out exactly who they were working for, and why:

Jessica blushed, and started to say something - probably something to dig herself in deeper - but just then, the man spoke. ‘I see that you keep in shape on this planet through a rigorous exercise programme of jumping to conclusions.While that might be a healthy regimen for the body, sir, it’s undoubtedly stunted your mind to a not inconsiderable degree!’

Erich winced. Jim wasn’t going to take lip like that for long. Sure enough, his face went bright red, and he shouted,1 will not take speech like that from some corporate spy! Just who do you think you are?’

‘I am the Doctor: The old man smiled politely and stuck out a hand to shake, like they were all old friends. ‘I’m a visitor here, but I’ve been hearing something about this sabotage of yours and I think I might be able to help you solve the problem:

Jim’s eyes lit up, and he smiled that same mean smile he gave Jess

when she made a big screw-up. ‘So you just landed on this planet, but you already know it’s sabotage? That’s interesting. Copeau, here, thinks it’s some natural malfunction, but you seein sure it’s sabotage. I wonder why that is:

‘Because I kept both my eyes and mind firmly open, that’s why. The signs were obvious from the moment I got within twenty feet of your ridiculous contraption.And if your perception wasn’t so utterly blinkered by your preconception, you’d have seen it too:

‘Seen what?’

The Doctor smiled, like a gracious boxer thanking a defeated opponent. ‘It’ll be easier if I show you:

Sarah Jane resisted the urge to snicker as she walked through the forest glade, a gentle breeze stirring her hair slightly as she basked in the pleasant sunshine. It felt like early summer in Kent, and she was glad that for once her choice of fashion and the Doctor’s choice of destination had matched perfectly. She also pitied the four people walking alongside her in bulky spacesuits, looking for all the world as if they were astronauts who’d accidentally landed in the middle of the English countryside.

When she’d said the weather outside was perfectly fine, though, they’d looked at her as if she’d suggested suicide. Strauss, the balding one who kept leering at her legs when he thought she wasn’t looking, had said,’Are you insane? We’ve only been surveying the life forms of this planet for six months. There could be any number of hazardous atmospheric parasites, contagious viruses, predators, contaminants - ‘

‘And if there are any of those things,’ she’d retorted, ‘the Doctor and I have already passed them on to you, haven’t we?

We were outside for the entire walk from the TARDIS to your laboratory, and it doesn’t seem to have done us any harm!’ Kelin, the vague one with the watery blue eyes and dirty blond hair, had said, ‘It’s standard procedure, Krau Smith.’ (’Krau’? she thought. What happened to ‘Ms’?) ‘A few minutes’ exposure could lead to a

lifetime of health hazards. That's why we stay safe in a sealed environment for the duration of the research mission, and have exploratory robots bring in samples for us to examine'

Jessica had glared at them dourly as she put on her own spacesuit... only they didn't call it a spacesuit; they had some jargon term for it. When in the future did humans start getting addicted to jargon? She hoped it wasn't in her lifetime. 'That turns out to have been the problem, doesn't it?'

They'd already been into all the experimental labs, where the Doctor had spent a few seconds rummaging around in the cages where the specimens were kept and came up with a handful of clear jelly, into which were mixed rubbery fragments of something-or-other. The Doctor had pronounced them to be eggshells, handed it all to the red-faced shouting man in charge - Sarah had tried so hard not to laugh - and pointed to the places where acids and solvents had melted through camera wires and cage locks:Similar to the damage we saw outside, isn't it, Sarah Jane?'

After a moment of looking (and quietly concealing her irritation - the Doctor might be a very egalitarian person, but that just meant that he patronised everyone equally), she'd concurred... and the Doctor had suggested that a trip outside would show everyone the true source of the sabotage. Which had led the four scientists to putting on those silly spacesuits, and which had led them right to this forested glade, where the Doctor was pointing to...

A slug. A big slug, too, about eight inches long. The Doctor gestured to it dramatically, and proclaimed, 'Ladies and gentlemen, might I introduce you to the dominant life form of the planet. I'm afraid I can't tell you their names; they communicate through sophisticated pheromonal secretions rather than through vibratory resonance.'

Sarah Jane spoke up, since she was sure all the scientists were as confused as she was but didn't want to admit it. 'You mean they communicate through scent, rather than sound?'

'Precisely, Sarah Jane:The Doctor beamed at her.

Sands's voice crackled through his suit's speakers. 'You're telling me those things are sentient? That they've been sabotaging our project for the last six months?'

'My dear fellow, they probably haven't even realised what your project is. All they've known is that some alien life form has been kidnapping them for unknown reasons, and they've been reacting like any sensible creature would under the circumstances. They've been escaping.'

Now hold on just a second!' That was Strauss, and he was just about blowing his speakers with distortion, he was shouting so loud. 'I'in willing to believe that what we've seen as "sabotage" has actually been the slug-things escaping on their own. But you cannot expect ine to believe that those things are sentient! They've got no culture, they've got no signs of habitation, no evidence of even the most rudimentary and primitive tools; these things just infest the mushroom trees like big... slugs!'

The Doctor shook his head, suddenly possessed of some ineffable sadness. 'The mushroom trees aren't a separate species, Strauss. They're the creatures' children.And as for evidence of tools... I handed it to your project coordinator only minutes ago'

For a long moinent, nobody said anything. Then Jessica spoke up, her voice awed:The eggshells?'

[text missing] eggshells!' As suddenly as the sadness had appeared, it vanished, leaving Sarah Jane to wonder if she'd imagined it. 'These life forms don't build tools the way we do; they're able to select their offspring's genetic characteristics intuitively as they gestate them. See that bird-like animal flying overhead? It's a genetically engineered sentry, bred from the eggs of one of these slugs to keep watch for enemies of rival nations. The insect crawling along the bole of the fungal tree? It's a repair drone, programmed at the genetic level with complex instincts that allow it to seek out and devour diseased patches of fungus. The fungal trees themselves are offspring of the Buil... of the base creature as well. When you can construct using basic ainino acids as building blocks like they do, there's no limit to what sorts of biotechnology you can create'

Amazing. Absolutely amazing' Sarah expected that to be Kelin, but it was actually Sands. There was a tone of wonder in his voice. Apparently, something had finally cracked through his cynicism and short temper after all. 'If this is true... if we can find some way to communicate with them...'

Kelin spoke up now 'It'd be a revolution in biotechnology! These creatures can create any form of life known to natural science... they could create life forms that could synthesise any form of biological compound, grow body parts - they could create biological defences against all known diseases! My God... we have simply got to get back to the lab and let Corporate know about this! It's -'

Then Sarah heard a sound so loud she thought her eardrums would burst. She looked up to see something massive descend towards the earth. At first it didn't look so large; then she saw one of the bird-things head towards it and realised it was actually miles away. She shuddered. ,Whatever it was, it had to be the size of a skyscraper.

All four of the scientists were saying something, but Jessica was the only one close enough for Sarah Jane to hear over the din. She didn't understand what she meant, though, when she said, 'No... it's twelve hours too soon...'

The apethings had returned from the strange edifice, and they had brought more of the walkingdeadthings with them. Thousandblossom shuddered all along the length of his body just looking at their smooth, strange skin They made harsh noises like the wind blowing through the nectar-vases, noises that the apethings seemed to find significant. It was difficult to tell, of course; the female could do little more than shriek and hoot scents of primal fear and anger. But the male could actually speak, albeit primitively.

He reached his hand out to Thousandblossom, bringing it close so that his primitive pheromonal messages could be heard.

{Me sorry,} he said. {Me try help Builders, but too late. More apethings come.They fight you. Me sorry.}

Thousandblossom was perplexed. {Why would the apethings come here and fight with us? And how? They do not have the tools to breed warrior-drones. We have been examining them for six months.Apart from the strange stonetools they have, they are entirely primitive, non-sapient creatures.} Thousandblossom suddenly remembered that he was speaking to an apething, even if it was clearly a very advanced member of its species. {Apethings very stupid,} he rephrased. {Why they fight us?}

The apething paused for a long moment. It seemed to be trying to phrase a very complex concept in a very simple way. Finally, it just said, {Because they very stupid. Me sorry. Me leave.}

Then it stood up and walked away. It would be many years before Thousandblossom understood what the apething had been trying to say.

The worst part, James knew as he watched the mining operations on the scanner, would be writing the report. It amounted to six months of failure, a lifetime of unrealised potential scoured away by the massive mining drones that could strip a planet to the core in a month, and probably the end of his career... But it wouldn't seem real to him until he wrote it all down and explained to posterity that his short-sightedness had wiped away a world of civilised, intelligent creatures

Copeau passed him the bottle silently. The whole team was gathered around, watching the world die for as long as they could before they had to leave. He'd apologised to her for not taking the orbital data seriously, she'd apologised to him for doubting his theory of sabotage; but it didn't matter anymore None of it did.They were all guilty of genocide by neglect now, and -

Kelin pointed to a bright flash on the monitors:There. Did you see that? One of the mining drones just went up!'

James tapped the screen to zoom in on the image:Holy crap... Look at that! It's some sort of giant beetle! It's firing something out of its shell! Like a boinbardier beetle, some sort of pressurised volatile gases! They're defending themselves!' Strauss reached past him and

tapped on the screen again, zooming in on the bug. ‘Look, it’s -’ He laughed, the sound of a man saved from the gallows:Look at the interlocking legs! Remind you of something?’

Jessica laughed too, now. The creatures - the Builders - weren’t beaten yet. ‘The capture drones! ‘While we were studying them, they were studying us!’ Huge pincers reached out and sheared a mining drone in half. And it looks like they did a better job!’

In an instant, the mood had changed. James felt better than he had since they touched down on this planet. They weren’t guilty of genocide, and the ‘Primitives’ looked like they could take care of themselves. It looked like there was going to be a happy ending to this after all.

He felt that way right up until the first impacts rocked the habitat dome. Then it occurred to him, during the mercifully brief last moments of his life, that the Builders probably made a connection between the people capturing them and the people attacking them.

‘Can’t blame them, though,’ he whispered, just before an explosion of volatile gases tore through the Operation Centre:They’re right:

Sarah Jane roughly shook off the Doctor’s hand as he closed the doors of the TARDIS, sealing them off from the outside world. ‘What was all that about?’ she asked indignantly:You darted off, you didn’t give us any time to say goodbye... They were busy trying to get in touch with their company, and you just slipped away like a thief in the night! Why -’

Then she saw the Doctor’s expression. It looked stricken, like a man who had just lost a close friend to a long-term fatal illness. He wouldn’t look back at her as he dematerialised the ship and set them adrift in the vortex. should have known I couldn’t do anything, Sarah Jane. I shouldn’t even have tried. But I had to know. I had to know how it all Started:

‘How what started?’ she asked. But the Doctor had said all he was going to say He pressed a few keys, bringing up a datafile on the TARDIS computer, and walked off into the depths of the ship. Sarah

Jane knew it would be hours, even days before she saw him again. So she read the datafile.

We may never know for certain what happened when humanity first A *made contact with the Builders, as no witnesses or records remain from the disastrous initial first-contact party. However the impression humans made on the Builders became clear when the first Builder fleets attacked human colonies in the Tau Centaura region. These fleets of massive bioweapons, modelled on mining ships, were capable of devastating whole planets within days. The Builders made full use of that capacity.*

The Builder Wars, as they are now known, lasted for two centuries, and were marked with a savagery born of mutual incomprehension. Neither side was capable of regarding the other as anything other than an infestation, and both sides took whatever measures they could to eliminate their foes. Over thirty million humans perished before the Terran Empire created the Entire Military Precise Resource Engagement Strategic System, the ultimate battle computer; to coordinate attacks across the galaxy against the Builder forces. This spelled the beginning of the end for the Builders, but the war did not truly end until the Builder homeworld was destroyed in 2832.

The Builder Wars were central in changing the human perception of aliens, and in changing the Terran Confederation into the Terran Empire. Never again, humans swore, would they give aliens a chance to wipe them out, and EMPRESS was given carte blanche to deal with aliens as it saw fit. This, in turn, gave rise to the Imperial Era of human history, which ended with the destruction of EMPRESS by an alien saboteur on 2 June 2982 (human calendar). But before...

Sarah Jane was suddenly glad the Doctor had left. She didn't know what she would have said to him. None of it seemed real. A few words on a screen condemned the people she'd met, the place she'd just seen, the planet she had just stood on to destruction. And all, she thought, because we didn't know how to say hello.

The Northern Heights
Mark Stevens

Friday 24 October 1930, 6.05 am.

They reluctantly emerge from the smog; first the pale yellow glow of the streetlamps, a feeble procession of beacons casting something that is neither light nor shadow into the morning haze.Then the towering walls of brick and iron, sliding out from the mist to rise above you, guarding the engine yards behind them with their monolithic presence. You continue forward, into the embrace of the building's shadow, subconsciously allowing your footsteps to synchronise themselves with the rhythmic pounding of steam and metal that has replaced the distant, reassuring hum of traffic and tradesmen.

As you approach the watchman's gate, you feel your muscles tense.This is one of those moments where they often try to reach out to you, probing at your foremost thoughts, trying to rearrange them into some sort of suggestion to which they hope you'll adhere. Sometimes they'll try to talk you into turning away, hoping you'll forget you were ever an employee of the King and Empire Railway Company. Sometimes they'll beckon you, attempting to lure you away from whatever it is you're doing, trying to guide you into the darker, unfamiliar areas of the engine yards, where accidents can happen.

You quickly duck into the entrance to the yards, sparing a sideways glance at the small brick building in which the watchman usually resides. The dirty, frosted window reveals some movement; an indistinct shadow causes a gas lamp to flicker within, but there is nothing more. They must be preoccupied elsewhere, because you pass through the gate without incident.They have no need of the watchman this morning.

A strong wind encourages you to hasten your step as you make your way across the primary engine yard, the biting cold carrying a hint of the winter's first snowfall.A few hundred yards away, amidst a

swirl of soot, steam and fog, a number of figures can be seen guiding a wheezing locomotive onto a turning track, preparing it for shunting. Although the yard engineers were among the first to succumb to the will of your new einployers, they pretty much keep themselves to themselves. It's the management and their private security firm you really need to keep an eye on.

'All right, mate.'

Thomas is early this morning. That's probably a good sign. He shelters within the gloom of an arched alcove, slouching against the sooty brickwork, a thick overcoat and a cigarette his only means of warding off the cold morning air.

'It's as good as any,' you say, fixing your eyes upon him, attempting to ascertain his mental well-being. One of these days, they'll get to him too. You're surprised he's managed to hold out this long, especially with all the hassle he's been getting from the hired thugs. He still sports a black eye froin his last encounter with them, but other than that he appears to be in good spirits. You're not quite sure what would happen if they broke him down before they got to you. Hopefully you're a faster runner.

Thomas jabs a thumb over his shoulder, pointing to a doorway lurking further back in the alcove. 'They've gone and locked me out again,' he says. 'Something tells me it's for good this time.'

Things are *really* getting out of hand now.

Thomas steps aside, inviting you to try the door to your office.You edge into the alcove and try your key, not in the least surprised when it fails to turn in the lock. It's possible the morning's crisp frost has frozen the locking mechanism, but you resign yourself to the more likely possibility - that the management have decided you're simply becoming too inquisitive.

You're in the process of bending down, attempting to peer through the lock, when Thomas nudges you in the ribs. 'Here comes trouble'

One of the men from the security firm has sidled out of the nearby

shadows, right hand hovering unnervingly close to his billy club.Thomas backs into you, pressing you against the locked door. You're suddenly aware that the thug has effectively blocked your only means of exiting the alcove. Things could get ugly if Thomas decides to let his mouth get the better of him.

The thug, a stocky, unshaven gentleinan of indeterminate age, says nothing for a moment or two, choosing instead to stare right through you. The effect is a little unsettling, although not entirely unexpected from those the inanagement have managed to place under their direct control. He tilts his head to one side, as if hearing soinething on the wind that's imperceptible to anyone else, then takes a step forward towards you.

'Mr Clement?' he asks.

You nod, slightly uneasy about the possible outcome of this conversation.

'You're wanted by the guv'nor. His office, nine o'clock'

With that, the thug turns heel to continue his patrol of the shadows.

Thoinas waits a short while, until the sound of crunching boots fades away, then begins anxiously fumbling about his person for another cigarette. 'Looks like today's the day,' he says: The Doctor said it'd be soon.'

You lean back against the door, forcing yourself to take a series of deep breaths. Part of you wonders if you have the strength to go through with all of this, while the other has already resigned itself to the fact that you crossed the point of no return a long tiine ago.You've already seen and heard enough to know what's at stake, what could happen if everything the Doctor's told you coines to pass.You reach a hand out towards your work colleague.

I think I need one of your cigarettes:

Covering letter dated Monday 23 March 1931. Excerpt

I hope it's not too inappropriate of me to take this opportunity to thank you and the other members of the Union who recommended me for the position I now occupy within the agency My father's legacy is something I'm reminded of on a daily basis, so I can only hope I'm able to live up to his reputation.

Before embarking upon the investigation into the incident previously referred to as the Northern Heights Anomaly, I thought it prudent to turn to my father's own memoirs for guidance, if only to gain some understanding of how he would collect his thoughts in preparation for what he might bear witness to. I remain forever fascinated by his description of mankind as 'an outpost of dwindling sanity in a chaotic and malevolent universe'. It was something that haunted me throughout my childhood, inasmuch as it was the only glimpse I had into the nature of my father's work before he took to securing his 1 journals under lock and key, but it has taken on a whole new meaning since my employment within our mutual circle.

It goes without saying that I now have a much richer understanding of the obligation my father undertook when offered employment by the Union. It's one that I now share and hope to meet with the same determination and resolve that he once did. I have long since resolved my own fears regarding the new avenues of exploration available to us - both physical and psychological. I'm still in awe of much of what the Union represents and that which we seek to confront, but to be afforded such an opportunity that is both educational and essential to the long-term survival of mankind is one I intend to take very seriously

Incident 15/23/720 field report. 20/03/1931.

Section I, page 5, excerpt

...unable to determine the precise nature of the technology involved, suffice to say that it could be considered far in advance of anything else that their nearest rivals currently possessed.

Upon investigation, an office located at 251 Water Lane, purported to have been registered to King and Empire, appeared to have long since been deserted. Much of the furnishings remained, albeit blanketed in thick dust that showed no signs of having been

recently disturbed. Curiously, the only exits we were able to ascertain had been secured from the inside. We can only conclude that there remains a hidden means of vacating the building that has so far eluded us.

Nevertheless, we were able to extract sufficient quantities of evidence from the location, including half a dozen filing cabinets and a safe, from which we were able to deduce a connection between King and Empire and the nature of the technology involved in sustaining life form Kappa 12.

Incident 515/23/720 field report. 20/03/1931.

Section 1, page 12, excerpt.

...two individuals for which we have no substantial evidence of their existence, only a small handful of unreliable eye-witness accounts.

The first is one Nicholas Clement, a young gentleman purported to have been an employee of King and Empire for two years. Personnel records from all London-based railway companies have been meticulously checked and cross-referenced, but none appear to have employed anyone with that surname within the last twenty years. At least, not officially. Casual labourers are regularly employed by the railroad companies for non-contractual work, their expenses only ever recorded as ‘miscellaneous wages’. However, Nicholas Clement was apparently a full-salaried employee of some import, if the level of access extended to him is any indication...

The second is a more elusive individual, for whom we don’t even have a full name. Once again, we have only eye-witness reports to account for his existence, but many of them are contradictory at best. The only commonalities amongst these accounts were that he was seen in the company of Nicholas Clement for much of the time and that he may have had some sort of medical background, given his propensity for wishing to be addressed simply as the Doctor.

Friday 24 October 1930, 9.08 am.

Despite the tall windows and expansive skylight, the office of Mr Charles Sutton-Long is bathed in an uneasy gloom; a darkness that is as much a part of the decor as the peeling wallpaper, the dainp circles on the ceiling and the pervasive odour of cigar smoke. You pull your chair forward, seeking to gain the benefit of the pale green light emitted by the lamp on your employer's desk.

MP Sutton-Long sits opposite you, peering intently at a chaotic pile of paperwork in front of him, occasionally removing his spectacles to rub his eyes.You've been engaged in small talk with him for the past five minutes or so, yet you remain painfully aware that he hasn't once made eye contact with you. There's no sense in putting things off any longer. You take a deep breath.

'When did they get to you, Mr Sutton-Long?'

The stocky gentleman pauses his perusal of the docuinents and turns his gaze toward you for the first time. For the briefest of moments, there's a flicker of recognition in his eyes, an acknowledgement of whatever it is that's been exerting its influence over the King and Empire railway company for the last six months. He then quickly turns away, reassuming the more familiar countenance of mistrust and suspicion.

'We're here to assess *your* position within the company, Mr Clement,' he says. Not mine.'

'Did you even try to resist?'You're not entirely sure if it's safe to pursue this particular line of conversation, but time's running out and you're in desperate need of some answers. 'What did it take for you to give in to them so completely?'

Mr Sutton-Long turns to look at you again, only this time there's something disconcerting about his gaze and the unfriendly smile that accompanies it. You recognise the dull ache that begins to grow just behind your eyes and inentally brace yourself for their next onslaught.

Your persistence is impressive, the familiar voice says. *But we grow tired of your interference.* Then the voice is gone.

Mr Sutton-Long sluinps onto the desk, shoulders heaving with the effort required to find each breath.You regard your employer for a moment or two as he tries to coinpose himself, debating whether or not to get up and leave or try to help him in some way.You're not entirely sure how much of Mr Sutton-Long still exists inside the head of the person slumped on the desk in front of you.

As you're about to collect your overcoat and depart, Mr Sutton-Long forces himself into an upright sitting position. He clears his throat a little feebly and shuffles soine of the paperwork before him.

'Mr Clement,' he says, his voice a little hoarse. 'My superiors have asked me to inform you that your contract of employment with King and Empire has been terminated.'

He beckons you closer into the light.You oblige and see the pain in his eyes, evidence of the difficulty with which he's maintaining his composure. 'Do what you need to do,' he says. 'Before they make me kill you.'

Friday 24 October 1930, 9.31 a.m.

You load the last of your personal possessions into the cardboard box on your desk.

You remain a little perturbed by the presence of the burly security guard, who currently sits near the door, arms folded, an irritating smirk on his grizzled face. You had hoped to try and procure some of the more sensitive documents that still remained hidden within the bowels of your filing cabinets, but the thug has already made it clear, with a characteristic promise of physical violence, that anything belonging to King and Empire is going to remain in the room.

You pause, hand poised above the box, as something flickers out of the corner of your eye.You turn towards the window, trying to stare past the soot-stained glass into the engine yard outside.

There's a sudden, overwhelming silence, then -

A flash of light and a dull, crumpled thump emanate from somewhere outside your office.

The thug immediately springs to his feet, tells you not to move a muscle and dashes outside to investigate the commotion. You hurry to the window, clearing a small patch of dirt with your sleeve. One of the locomotives out in the yard appears to be on fire. A dozen or so figures can be seen running around it, yelling at one another.

You almost don't hear the sound of someone clearing their throat behind you. You whirl round to find a familiar face peeping around the frame of the office door.

'Do apologise to your employers next time you see them,' the Doctor says, flashing you a quick smile. 'I rather suspect they'll be quite angry with my little act of industrial sabotage'

You return the smile. 'Somehow I doubt they'll be welcoming me back any time soon'

'That's the spirit - come on!'

With a colourful whirl of overcoat and scarf, he disappears.

Well, this is it. There's no going back now.You take a deep breath and follow the Doctor out into the yard.

Incident 515/23/720 field report. 20/03/1931.

Section 2, page 14, excerpt

...for the existence of Mr Nicholas Clement is open to debate.

One of our contacts within New Scotland Yard reportedly received a telephone call from an individual who identified himself as Mr Clement. He described himself as an employee of King and Empire who had reason to believe that illegal business activities were being conducted by his peers. He didn't go into too much detail regarding these activities, although he made certain to express his fear for his

own life, which he believed to be in danger.

A New Scotland Yard log sheet, dated October 13th 1930, indicates that an officer by the name of R. Bradley was dispatched to the registered office of King and Empire to investigate the matter brought to their attention by Mr Clement. The log sheet remains the only evidence for the existence of Officer Bradley. Our contact confirms that he had no personal dealings with a police officer by that name, nor is there any record of this officer's employment by New Scotland Yard. The entry in the log sheet has been dismissed as a clerical error by senior members of staff.

Incident 515/23/720 field report 20/03/1931.

Section 2, page 24, excerpt

-.extract of statements, regarding the existence and/or whereabouts of Nicholas Clement, made by employees of the London and North Eastern Railway company. Statements are derived from full interviews adhering to regular interview protocol and procedure.

'Can't say that I would have noticed him even if he was based here. Them at head office rarely trouble themselves with those of us in the yard. My guv'nor, Mr Purnell, he's the only one I speak to who wears a suit.' (Edward Brase, yard engineer)

'I've lost count of the number of times people come poking around, never stopping to introduce themselves. You have to wonder if it's all above board. Although now that I think of it, there have been more folk than usual these past few months. The last one I ! 'remember was doing some survey or the other. Walked up and down 11 the entire line between Muswell and Ally Pally, measuring stuff and writing things down. Then he just disappeared into thin air.' (Robert Ashburgh, yard engineer)

* * *

Friday 24 October 1930, 10.02 a.m.

A sudden jolt ejects you from the darkness.

You find yourself entangled in a mesh of thin rope, unable to free your right arm or left leg. You struggle for a moment, cursing the fact that you've allowed yourself to be captured so easily. It wasn't supposed to be -

'I wouldn't worry, my good man. It's just the mail net.'

You relax a little, recognising a friendly voice. The Doctor sits a few metres away, idly examining the contents of a crumpled paper bag.

'You seemed awfully relaxed, if the snoring was anything to go by.'

Feeling a little foolish, you carefully free yourself from the confines of the net and scramble out of the little nook, steadying yourself as an irregular rocking motion catches you off guard.

'Where are we?' you say.

The Doctor locates a pocket watch from within the voluminous folds of his overcoat and flips it open. 'As the crow flies, approximately two miles away from Alexandra Palace'

'I've got the worst headache you could possibly imagine:

'Oh, I wouldn't count on it the Doctor says. 'I've met headaches the size of a planet.You have no idea how difficult they are to converse with'

You make your way over to the opposite end of the carriage, easing some feeling back into your cramped muscles, taking some air to try and clear your head. It feels like you've been out cold for hours, if not days. You focus on your immediate thoughts, tracing them back to the last thing you remember. You were sprinting across the engine yard at Highgate, struggling to keep up with the Doctor as he led you towards a line of carriages attached to a locomotive.You remember the livery that adorned the carriages, the scripted swirls and loops of the King and Einpire insignia set against the deep crimson paintwork. This was one of the special services, open only to a select number of the railway company's key personnel.

You tumbled inside a carriage, after the Doctor briefly paused to disable the lock with one of his gadgets, then felt the darkness hit you like a powerful wave.

‘I’m afraid the light-headed spells and queasiness are going to escalate from this moment on,’ the Doctor says. ‘We’re getting closer to the anomaly now It’s going to do everything in its power to turn you away:

You take another deep breath, fighting off the wave of nausea that suddenly overcomes you. ‘It’s been inside my head so long now,’ you say. ‘I think I was rather getting used to it’

The Doctor rises to his feet and joins you at the end of the carriage. He extends the crumpled bag toward you. ‘Take some of these. The blackberry ones in particular should ease the symptoms,’ he says, then grins. At least they always settle my stomach when travelling.’

You reach inside and retrieve a few items of colourful confectionery, popping one inside your mouth. A series of jolts reverberate along the carriage and you feel the train slow to a halt.

‘I do believe we’ve arri-’

You don’t hear the Doctor complete his sentence, because the darkness returns, rushing up to ineet you at an unnerving speed. Only this time, you’re not alone in the darkness.A barely perceptible voice lingers at the fringes of your awareness, forcing you to concentrate to make any sense of it.

Why do you persist? You will join us. You will become us.

Then the thin buzzing that whistles around you turns into a scream and reality snaps back into focus around you. - any ways it’s actually very, very impressive.’

It takes you a few moments to orientate yourself and make sense of what you’re looking at.

The Doctor stands beside you, at the edge of the platform. You allow your gaze to follow the track as it curves away from you, converging with dozens of additional tracks a hundred metres away. You have a little trouble reconciling what happens to the tracks from that moment on.

Half of them fade away into the inky void of a large tunnel, undoubtedly heading off to merge with numerous lines on the London Underground. The others, however, bend sharply upwards, some corkscrewing into a place where the arcing roof of the railway station should logically be, only to disappear into a silky black nothingness. Some of the tracks flip back across the expansive ceiling before falling away into the sky, climbing up to impossible heights before losing themselves beyond the reach of your perception.

'Well, Mr Clement,' the Doctor says, only marginally less awed by the spectacle before you. 'I think we can safely say that your einployers had good reason to keep this under their hats.'

With a deafening roar of steam and metal, a locomotive hauls itself free of one of the gravity-defying singularities above you, dragging its carriages along the inverted track like some industrial centipede, before orientating Itself to approach one of the station's many platforms.

The darkness returns. You *will become us.*

Incident 515/23/720 field report. 20/03/1931.

Section 3, *page 44, excerpt.*

...establishing the existence of the individual know as the Doctor has proven even more difficult than that of Nicholas Clement. Of the 43 employees of London and North Eastern Railway interviewed, six of them described the individual we believe to be the Doctor. On each occasion he was observed to be within the proximity of one of four railway stations within the Northern Heights area — namely Highgate, Cranwell Gardens, Muswell Hill and Alexandra Palace. On each occasion he appeared to be

unescorted.

The individual was described by these six employees as follows: tall, dark curly hair, dressed from head to foot in a brown (or grey) tweed jacket, a long scarf wrapped around his neck.

None of those interviewed recall addressing, speaking or otherwise interacting with the man. However, one interviewee did take it upon himself to act on his suspicions and discreetly follow the Doctor one evening (see page 65).

Incident 515/23/720 field report. 20/03/1931.

Section 3, page 65, excerpt.

...important as it's the only recorded account of an eye- witness interacting with the Doctor. Here's a relevant extract from the interview conducted with Thomas Langley, a track walker employed by the London and North Eastern Railway company:

'Now, it's not unusual for a track walker such as myself to encounter a tramp or two, wandering around at odd hours of the morning, so I can't say that I was surprised when I happened to chance upon this gentleman. And I call him a gentleman because he certainly didn't look like the poor blighters I regularly see.

'He was standing approximately 20 yards away, near the catch points on the opposite side of the track, wearing one of them fancy tweed overcoats, with a multi-coloured scarf that was wrapped tightly around his neck but still long enough to trail a few feet behind him. He was staring up at the sky, which is as well to say he wasn't staring at much, given the fog. He held some sort of tool in front of him — a measuring device is as best I can describe it — which got me thinking if he was one of the new foremen.

'I called out to him, half expecting him to turn tail and bolt into the trees, but he stood his ground without so much as a flinch. Without even turning, still staring up at nothing, he bid me good morning and proceeded to ask me all sorts of strange questions. I must confess to not understanding half of them, but he occasionally made

mention of warp tunnels. I told him we'd just recently repaired those north of Highgate. He congratulated me much heartily but steered the conversation back to whatever it, was that preoccupied him.

I must confess to being distracted by his cheerful banter, because I failed to ask him his business and direct him away from the tracks. He strode off in the direction I was heading in, waving his measuring device around, occasionally asking even more diabolical questions, some of which I ventured to answer as best I could.

'Before too long we reached an area of the track overshadowed by a signal hut, a few hundred yards from the Muswell station. The stranger thanked me for the information I had apparently imparted to him then retreated inside an old police telephone box that lurked behind the hut. I can't say that I noticed that box before that morning, nor do I understand how it got out there, in the middle of nowhere, but nevertheless that's where the gentleman headed.

I stood there in the dark for a minute or so, wondering if the stranger was affiliated with the police in some way, when the strangest thing happened. The lamp fixture began flashing, then there was an awful din, the likes of which I've only heard in maintenance yards when they're loading rails. I ventured back round the hut, to the tracks, to see if the commotion had been caused by something on the line, but saw nothing.

'Heading back to the police box, once the noise had faded away, I was startled to find it had completely disappeared. There was no sign of it or the stranger who'd occupied it a few moments earlier.'

Everything seemed a lot less complicated back then.

You recall your first train journey from York to London, in a first-class carriage pulled by an impressive Great Western

Castle-class locomotive - only three years old and apparently setting new records on what seemed like a weekly basis - watching the countryside roll past at an astonishing rate.An opportunity to work in and around the engine yards of Highgate was nothing short of a

dream come true.

A group of school children bundle along the aisle beside you, racing one another for the prime viewing position offered by the carriage door's window, laughing and -

Why do you persist?

You know it can't reach you, that it's afraid of you.

You *cannot resist forever*

- grabs you by the arm, half guiding you, half dragging you across one of the platforms that spirals away into another reality, some distance away.

'We haven't got much time; the Doctor says, suddenly aware of the locomotives that have begun to grind their way into the station from all sorts of gravity-defying directions. Occasionally they screech to a halt, allowing numerous figures to disembark. He consults a device he's been carrying, giving it a sharp tap as if persuading it to function correctly. An array of lights blinks back at him.

'We're not too far away. Hurry -'

Open your mind to us.

Like an itch you can't scratch.

You will understand.

Sutton-Long stands and addresses those of you gathered in the boardroom. 'As I'm sure many of you are aware, King and Empire have now purchased a majority share of London and North Eastern, which effectively means that the Northern region, including the stations, outgoing routes and stock held by the various yards under their jurisdiction, are now under our control. As of today, you're all employed by King and Empire, although we must warn you in advance that there will be redundancies'

There's a ripple of disquiet and a few vocal snorts of derision. Sutton-Long raises his hand before continuing.

'We do apologise for any inconvenience. We will, of course, seek to find employment for those of you we'll unfortunately be letting go, but this is necessary to bring in highly trained personnel who are best equipped to deal with the upgrades we intend to -'

Why do you resist when you have so much to gain through compliance?

Whatever you need to do, Doctor, do it fast.

You will become us.

- not to look anywhere but the ground beneath you,' the Doctor suggests:You're not in danger of falling, but your mind will try to tell you otherwise if you don't focus'

You're not entirely sure what he means, so you casually glance over your shoulder. The platform lurches away beneath you, disobeying the laws of physics as it twists and plunges toward a spaghetti junction of iron and steel. Somewhere within the tangled geometry, you spy movement -another railway station, albeit one you don't recognise. Beside its platform rests a sleek, red steam train. It grips the track above it, beneath it, or wherever it's supposed to be, allowing a number of soldiers adorned with red turbans and cream apparel to board its carriages.

All; says the Doctor, coming to a sudden stop. He bends down to peer at something over the edge of the platform:I think this is it' Overwhelmed by a sudden onslaught of nausea and dizziness, you -

If you will not join us, you will be purged.

- trudge through the deep snow.The huge iron gates of the engine yard loom large before you, pointing up into the flurry of snow that whips around the early morning sky. The lanterns sheltering under the porch shudder and sputter, unable to penetrate the gloom with their feeble glow.

A deep, resonant hum of distant machinery can be felt through the ground at your feet and the thick iron bars you grip tightly in each hand.You peer beyond the gate, into the dark interior of the shed, wondering what they're developing that warrants such secrecy and death.The wind picks -

stop!

- be most grateful if you could keep it occupied; the Doctor says. It doesn't appear to be aware of my existence, but I rather suspect it will if those soldiers it has under its influence see what I'm up to.'

You peer up and down the singularity, keeping your eye on the groups of armed men who appear to be converging on your location. They tentatively edge their way along the warped curvature, not entirely sure if they should trust their senses.

You will cease.

The Doctor continues fiddling with an assortment of gadgets that spill out of, his pockets, occasionally attaching one of them to whatever it is that's preoccupied him on the track below.

'What *are* you up to?' you ask.

'A bit of spring-cleaning; the Doctor replies. It's a relatively simple procedure, but I had to do it at the right time, in the right -'

Destroy him.

The snow's falling much heavier now. You turn away from the gate, ignoring the voice inside your head that's trying to plant foreign thoughts there. You're stronger than the others, but you don't know how much longer you'll be able to hold out. Hopefully long enough to help this Doctor bloke do what he needs to do.You're the only one left now. Poor Tubb couldn't hold on. With any luck they showed some mercy when they tore him -

What are you doing to us?

The droning sound reaches a crescendo, quickly taking on a pulsating, rhythmic quality.

‘Here we go; says the Doctor. ‘You might want to close your eyes.’

A pale blue glow unwinds itself from one of the singularities, slowly gaining substance. A shape emerges from within the light - a tall, rectangular box, some ten feet high.A series of thundering booms can be heard as the object wrenches itself out of whatever dimension it had previously occupied.

There’s a deafening shriek as the voice inside your head is pulled away, spiralling around the maelstrom of debris that swirls around the blue object.The singularities too finally succumb to this devastating new force, unfurling, fading away into the infinities they had once emerged from as local space begins readjusting itself.

The horrifying screams throw you back into the familiar black void.

Incident 515/23/720 field report. 20/03/1931.

Section 4, page 72, excerpt.

...concerning the anomaly itself, which we have reason to believe is a sentient life form (classification Kappa 12) with strong psychic abilities. The Union remote viewer (RV2) who initially filed incident 515/23/720 described it as a ‘potential chaotic intrusion with a 98% chance of breaching Temporality Alpha (local/relative space-time)’.

Incident 515/23/720 field report. 20/03/1931.

Section 4, page 92, excerpt.

...conclusions that can be drawn:

1.Prior to an undetermined date in August 1930, Kappa 12 breached Temporality Beta within a 10-mile radius of 51’ 29’ N and 0’ 0’ W.

2.A telepathic connection was made with Kappa 12 by RV2, although attempts to communicate with it in this fashion resulted in critical failure.

3.While Kappa 12 had no physical presence in our universe, the extent to which it was able to warp space/time within its vicinity allowed us to estimate that it had breached an area of alternate temporality some 7.23 miles in diameter.

4.RV7 reported an approximate exponential growth rate of 10% within a 32-day period. Kappa 12's ability to warp space/time increased at the same rate. By our estimation the planet's gravitational stability would be compromised within 23 months. We believe this behaviour to be intentional and a means of allowing Kappa 12 to establish a permanent conduit between our reality and its own. We presume this is for hostile purposes.

5.RV4 reported a similar exponential growth rate of Kappa 12's telepathic sphere of influence. Those susceptible to its transmissions (an estimated 93% of adult males and 97% of adult females) would most likely find themselves open to suggestion or possibly fall under direct control of Kappa 12.

6.All singularities and anomalies caused by the growth of Kappa 12 converged in an area located some 50 metres below the Alexandra Palace railway station. In Temporality Beta, this particular section of the railway was owned by the King and Empire Railway Company. There's some evidence to suggest their influence managed to breach Temporality Alpha.

7.It is unknown exactly who was responsible for the formation of the King and Empire Railway Company, although it's believed the British government had some knowledge of its existence, given the large numbers of military personnel that were shipped around the network.

8.RVs 4 and 7 were able to investigate and trace several of the warp singularities, reporting that their exit nodes were located at several key locations around the globe, including (but not limited to) Prince

George (Canada), Durban (South Africa), Calcutta (India) and Fremantle (Australia). RV links were disrupted before further investigation of these territories could be conducted, although it appears Kappa 12 was able to expand the British Empire's rail network into distant territories through its ability to warp space/ time.

9.The individual known as the Doctor appears to have been able to counteract the influence of Kappa 12 and evacuate it from Temporality Beta. The whereabouts of the individual known as Nicholas Clement, who aided the Doctor in this venture, is currently unknown. No trace of him can be found in any of the known temporalities.

You give your glass a half-hearted swirl, watching the amber liquid travel around its perimeter a couple of times before eventually settling. You allow yourself to relax a little and enjoy the familiar surroundings. The interior of the pub is small and poky, but it's never really busy, not even during the evening.The fireplace still crackles the same way, exuding the same warmth. The black Labrador still sits in its favourite spot a few metres away, tail occasionally thumping against the carpet in response to whatever it's chasing it its dreams. One or two of the regular patrons sit in their usual places, voices lowered as they conduct their own private conversations.

Despite being surrounded by so much that is familiar, you can't actually remember the name of the pub. You can't remember caring much for the taste or texture of whisky either, but it came with the Doctor's compliments, so you consume the contents of the glass in one swift movement.

'What happens now?'

The Doctor starts, having become a little too comfortable within the fireside armchair. He blinks a couple of times, as if regaining his bearings, ,then fixes you with a stare that's direct but friendly.

'Now? Now, Mr Clement, we go home,' he says, collecting his scarf and overcoat.

Maybe the light is fading and the shadows are growing a little longer, for now the pub looks smaller than it did a few moments ago. It's certainly a lot quieter too - you're suddenly aware that the regular patrons and bar staff are nowhere to be seen. Even the dog appears to have abandoned its favourite spot by the fireplace.

The Doctor rises to his feet, walks to the front door and opens it for you.

'What's waiting for me out there?' you ask.

'Your future; the Doctor replies.

'I didn't think I had one:

'Oh, I wouldn't say that. Just make a wish and put your best foot forward:

'But you said once this was all over, there's a good chance I'd cease to exist.'

The Doctor smiles. 'Well, yes, eventually. But I didn't necessarily mean right away:

The shadows converge around you, swallowing up the fireplace and the table at which you were sitting.A darkness beyond the door beckons. 'I'd better warn you though; he says. 'It's a lot bigger on the inside.'

Observation
Ian Farrington

By the time the Doctor looked up, the TARDIS had landed. He opened the scanner screen and a grin spread across his face. ‘Will you look at that,Turlough!’ he said.

I turned to face the screen and saw that we’d landed on a barren plain. In j the distance, I could see the scatterings of a forest and a slow-moving river. The Doctor dashed through the inner door, returning barely two seconds later, his frock coat swirling behind him. In his left hand, he was holding a battered, fraying bag - the long kind cricketers use to carry their bats.

‘You’re going to play a game?’ I asked, incredulously.

The grin faded to a pained, frustrated expression. ‘The bag has more than one purpose,’ he said. Come along.’

The Doctor pulled down the lever to open the TARDIS’s door and strode out. I joined him after a second or two: he’d already begun to walk down *a* nearby incline. It was a warm, hazy day - cloudless and very bright.

‘Which planet are we on?’ I asked as I caught up.

‘I haven’t the foggiest idea,’ he said with a face that gave away he clearly *did* know where we were. His mischievous traits were so tiresome at times. We walked in silence for a few moments, and then the Doctor began to pass comment on the flora, which I generally hmm’d back at. It was the beginnings of spring, I’d say.

We then came to a rise to the north of the TARDIS’s position, from the top of which we could look down on to the vast plains that stretched out beyond.

‘Look,’ the Doctor said.’Down there!’ He pointed to a small gathering of trees about a hundred metres away: within their

enclosure was a small group of humanoids. Some were sleeping, others restlessly moving about.

The Doctor had taken out some binoculars from his bag. After a moment, I held my hand out and he passed them to me. I could see the creatures closely now - the Doctor's device allowing crystal clear magnification. There was something about their posture, their standing; *the* way they looked at each other...

'They're human,' I said.

'Very good,' said the Doctor, meaning it with a smile. 'Yes, it's Earth.We're thousands of years before your adopted home - it's about forty thousand years BC. And a few hundred miles south.'

'Fascinating,' I said: But why are we here?'

'To find the answer to one of Earth's greatest mysteries,' he said grandly. 'Where did Humanity come from? The TARDIS and I have been researching the point for some time, and we've narrowed it down... ' His eyes were sparkling by this point: It's astounding.This is the place where it happened.Where the human race was born:

'Yes; I said. 'They're over there:

'Not quite,Turlough.The *human* race. *Homo sapiens.This* is the place where two proto-human species, the Cro-Magnons and the Neanderthals, came into contact. It's a crucial unexplored period in evolution: no one knows what happened. Did they fight? Mate? Co-inhabit? Develop tools? Were the Neanderthals instrumental in the development of Humanity? Or were they, as some have argued, more of an evolutionary cul-de-sac - wiped out by the Cro-Magnons, or by something else?'

I had to admit that this was intriguing - simply on a scientific level, of course. I asked when it was going to happen.

'Well; said the Doctor, quite sheepishly. 'It's difficult to narrow it down absolutely, but I should think an observation period of six months would be enough to record the salient points.'

I was amazed:You expect us to sit here for six months?!'

The Doctor's face pulled an all-too-familiar expression: one of hurt. 'Well...' he began. I've always meant to come back and find out what happened. It's a significant gap in established science.'

'Yes, but six months?'

'You don't have to stay if you don't want to: He crouched down next to his bag and began to unpack:You can operate the TARDIS, can't you? Why not go back and then jump forward to pick me up?' He flashed me a smile.

'You trust me?' I admit these words came out of my mouth rather than simply being a thought process as intended.The Doctor stood up.

'Of course.'

'Well; I said. 'If you're sure you'll be all right?' He squatted back down and arranged some equipment on a boulder. I noted that he'd managed to pack an unbelievable amount of electronic paraphernalia into a small bag.

'I'll be fine, 'Turlough,' he said - though his mind was elsewhere, contemplating the correct alignment of his surveillance scanner.

I bent down and began to take a closer look at the Doctor's equipment, but he swatted my hand away and carried on his preparations.

'Yes, well... I'll see you in six months: I half-turned, waiting for a response. 'Okay?'

'Hmm?' he said, his attention once again waning.

I walked back to the TARDIS, occasionally turning back to see if the Doctor had even noticed I'd gone. But no, he was enthralled - his hands racing across equipment as quickly as his mind must have

been.

Inside the ship, the scanner was still open. I could see the Doctor on top of the rise. He was now peering over the boulder, presumably trying to watch the cavemen without being seen himself. His vantage point was good enough to hide him fairly well: high up, with cover, it was practically inaccessible from below. I now realise that I'd had no thought at the time of just *how* he'd survive - six months was a long time to cope in the elements without proper food or shelter.

No, my only thought had been along the lines of, 'This is madness.' I tapped the coordinates into the TARDIS controls - not moving in space made it an easy journey, and half a year was a fairly simple process for the TARDIS to manage - and as the ship began its journey, the scanner automatically closed.The last image I saw was the Doctor in the distance, stood up tall with his hands in his pockets.

The journey took seconds. I opened the scanner and saw exactly the same vista. 'file colour tone had changed - less bright, less blinding; more subdued - but the landscape was the same. The Doctor was still where I had last seen him I zoomed in with the scanner controls. He was sat on a small boulder, his knees up against his chest. The dying embers of a campfire sat by his side; scattered around his feet were assorted pieces of scientific equipment.

I couldn't see his face, but the posture told me enough. Something was wrong. I buttoned my jacket together, closed the scanner and left the TARDIS.

'You took your time,' said the Doctor as I approached. Was I late? I had to admit to myself that I hadn't looked at the TARDIS controls upon arrival. I hadn't double-checked that the journey had been as planned. Maybe I was several years late...

'What do you mean?'

'Or maybe it just seems like you've been gone a long time.' He stood up and for the first time - the first time since I'd met him, I think - I

could see tiredness in his eyes. He slowly began to pack away his equipment. Sensing that he didn't want to talk, I walked up the slight ridge and looked down on the encainpment of humans. There they were, just as I'd seen ,them months before: no distinguishable difference.

I turned to ask the Doctor what was wrong, but he was already up and 'walking towards the TARDIS. His arms were full of miscellaneous bits and pieces of machinery, but his cricket bag and various other scanners, monitors and tools were lying on the ground.

'Bring the rest, will you?' he called back. I packed things away into the bag, but stopped when something fell out of my hand. It was a notebook, which had fallen open, allowing me to see that it was full of the Doctor's handwriting.

Day One. Turlough has just left. Subjects are unaware of my position, and seem to have just eaten. I am about to set up surveillance equipment.

I did feel slightly bad about reading the notebook. I furtively glanced up, to see if the Doctor had noticed what I was doing. He was just stepping in to the TARDIS. I kneeled down, with my back to the ship - so as to block the scanner's view of what I was doing - and read on.

Later. The machinery is in place. I now have a full 360-degree scanner in operation, which will tell me if anything bigger than a dormouse approaches. The atmospheric reader is on line and all the recording devices are active.

The TARDIS databanks gave me temporal coordinates that were, in the scope of the galactic timeline, incredibly precise. However, in terms of individual perception, of actually having to sit through the time window given... well, its not that *precise. I know that the event I'm waiting to observe - the first interaction between the two species, who may lead to the creation of the space-faring human race - will happen here in this valley, at some point during the next half-cycle of the planet.*

I skipped a few pages with my left hand, whilst packing away equipment with my right.

Day Four. The subjects live out a regular pattern of life. They awake near dawn, hunt, eat and sleep.

There was then a line that had been hastily crossed out:

Not unlike the humans that have travelled with me.

Finding it hard to disagree, I again flicked a few pages forward.

Day 24. The first spotting of the Neanderthals. My sensors alerted me to their presence late last night: they are a few miles away - out of visual range - but are approaching slowly from the east. I estimate they will arrive tomorrow. Their line of approach will see them pass within a few hundred metres of the subjects.

Day 27. The Neanderthals have stopped. I was tracking them when I realised they'd stopped about a mile away, still out of sight. At first, I assumed they were resting or eating - but they haven't moved one jot since. Life signs are unchanged.' none of them are injured or especially tired. My survey of the area I did on Day 2 tells me they have stopped at a nondescript clearing - certainly nowhere near shelter or water. It's so frustrating. The subjects, meanwhile, sit there - tantalisingly close. I cannot interfere. There is still a window of several weeks for the meeting to take place.

Day 32. I am stuck here on this ridge. For not only my own personal safety, but also for the Laws of Time (I'm not sure which I'm more concerned about at present), I cannot risk either group seeing me, let alone coming in to significant contact with me.

Day 40. They've gone. They vanished from the scanning equipment yesterday, and no matter how I widen the field or search on foot, I can't find them. Did I get the information wrong? The subjects - the Cro-Magnons I've been sharing this part of the world with for six weeks - have been completely oblivious to the Neanderthals' presence.

Day 113. Nothing to report.

‘Species development takes thousands of years,’ I said to myself. ‘You know that, Doctor.’ I sympathised with his frustration, but it had been an ambitious undertaking: to see evolution happen.

Day 134. Where is Turlough? Actually, I’m quite glad he decided not to stay. His sarcasm would be quite unbearable.

Oh, thanks.

Something *should have happened. Something should have been observable - either scientifically or visually. Now, I’d quite easily settle for one Cro-Magnon and one Neanderthal to look at each other and nod acknowledgement before going their separate ways.*

Of course, maybe that’s the answer. Maybe there never was any definite connection or interaction between the two species. I’ve been expecting something seminal: some physical act of evidence that could be applied to the whole of humanity; some small development that would explain how one day a human would walk on the moon, or kill millions by dropping a bomb, or travel faster than the speed of sound, or be there at the end of time.

The research I did in the TARDIS was sound enough, scientifically testable and verifiable. But, perhaps what it detected was what I’ve observed; maybe the closest the two groups ever get is the mile or two I’d witnessed.

Day 182. I’ve scouted round one last time. Turlough is due back any day. I found something - coordinates 16.02-20- 03. How could I have been so stupid?

And where has Turlough got to? I need to leave.

The notebook ended here. I rooted around and found the Doctor’s survey handset. I tapped in the coordinates and the read-out told me where to look. It was only a few hundred metres away, in some undergrowth to the southeast. After glancing to make sure the Doctor hadn’t come out of the TARDIS to see what I was up to, and stamping out the dying fire, I jogged over to see what he’d

discovered.

It was a body. A Neanderthal body, lying twisted on the ground. I knelt clown and had a closer look. It had been dead for quite a while, a few days at least. From the position it was lying in, I reasoned that it had fallen from the nearby incline and rolled down. As I looked, I suddenly sensed I was being watched. I looked up the incline and saw another Neanderthal stood there.

[Text missing]

Mortal Thoughts
Trevor Baxendale

[Text Missing]

The Doctor was glowering at her as well. ‘Mel, the very few examples that I have come across of computers - purely mechanical computers, mind - that *are* capable of entering anything like a dream-state were designed - *will be* designed - far into the future:

A fly buzzed lazily across the room, drugged on the late summer warmth outside. Simon said, can see that this time-travelling business must be very confusing.’

‘You don’t know the half of it, Simon!’ Mel smiled. ‘But I can assure you that there is nothing as confusing as trying to hold a conversation with someone who continuously comes up with words like “psychologico-human”!’

‘The word “psychologico-human” was first coined in the late twenty-first century by Professor Dorkus Merriman, I’ll have you know,’ said the Doctor sharply:I happened to be there at the time:

Naturally,’ Mel said wearily.

‘Although I’ll admit that it wasn’t included in the Oxford English Dictionary until 2107:

‘Now *i’m* getting confused; Mel complained. ‘Where did all this start?’ ‘We were discussing my dreams; said Simon.

We were discussing the *possibility* of robots dreaming; the Doctor corrected him. ‘And dismissing it:

‘Out of hand; Mel added tartly. ‘Oh, come on, Doc. If Simon says he’s dreaming, then why shouldn’t he be?’

‘Because it’s scientifically impossible for him to do so, Mel.’ The

Doctor flapped an impatient hand at the fly as it sailed past his ear.

Simon looked from the Doctor back to Mel, as if awaiting her response. His egg-shaped head reminded her suddenly of a skull, with its black camera-eyes and loudspeaker grill for a mouth. His arms and legs were made of thin, flexible metal tubing. In fact, she realised, he resembled a futuristic silver skeleton.

‘Simon is a model 1711 “Robohuman”; the Doctor continued, ‘manufactured by Strelda Androids in the year 2185. Two hundred years after your time Mel, and ridiculously advanced compared to the primitive little toys you called computers in 1986, but still nowhere near the level of sophistication required to even *simulate* human brain patterns. And that includes dreaming, by any definition of the word you care to choose.’

‘But you’re overlooking something; said Mel.

‘Nonsense!’ declared the Doctor loudly. I never overlook anything:

‘But Simon *is* exceptional - even for a model 1711 “Robohuman”.You said that yourself, remember? He’s been augmented to - what did you call it - “a level twenty omnitronic consciousness”:

‘That memory of yours will fail one day, you know,’ the Doctor remarked unfairly. He wagged a finger warningly ‘Old age is a great leveller, Mel:

‘Maybe I’ll be as absent-minded as you when I’m 950 years old, then’

‘Absent-minded!’

‘But I am right, aren’t I?’ Mel smiled sweetly. ‘You *did* say that Simon is exceptional?’

Simon looked at the Doctor, who stuffed his hands into the pockets of his yellow striped trousers and huffed. ‘Model seventeen-elevens come with a standard positronic brain, yes. Simon’s happens to

have been upgraded with a very advanced multi-omnitronic processor, it's true'

'Well, then'

'But it's no more than a... a family sedan refitted with the engine of a sports car! It might be able to go faster, but it's still only a car when all is said and done.' The Doctor sighed and looked at Simon. I'm sorry, Simon. It's just not possible. Whatever you have experienced during your off-line periods are *not* dreams'

Simon sat and stared at the Doctor's green shoes. 'I would very much *like* to dream.'

There was a pause, just long enough for each of them to think that perhaps they ought to say something more. But before anyone could speak, the fly buzzed straight between Simon and the Doctor. Reacting with amazing speed, Simon snatched the fly out of the air.

'Ohmigosh; gasped Mel. 'That was fast!'

'Just fast enough,' Simon told her. He held the insect between his finger and thumb, where it struggled and buzzed feebly. The Doctor smiled. 'And like any good robot, Simon wouldn't even hurt a fly.'

For a second Mel thought that Simon was about to release the tiny creature. But then he sent a current of electricity through his metal fingers of sufficient strength to fry it. With a fizz and a wisp of smoke the insect was turned into a smudge of carbon.

'On the other hand...' said the Doctor.

'I thought you said robots couldn't harm anything,' said Mel reproachfully. 'That it was completely contrary to all their basic programming.'

'Yes, I did,' agreed the Doctor. 'And it's true - in most cases.'

'Forgive me,' Simon said. 'Part of my basic programming incorporates a number of simple hygiene subroutines. Pest control

is one of them. It's automatic. I'm sorry if I startled you.'

'Not at all,' said the Doctor. Uncharacteristically, he hesitated before adding: 'I'm sorry, Simon, but there really is nothing more I can do for you. Might I suggest that you contact a qualified robotician?'

'I understood that you *were* qualified. "In practically everything."'

'Well, yes, that's true...' The Doctor clasped the pink and yellow lapels of his absurd coat and inflated his chest. 'And ordinarily I would, of course, leap at the chance of helping you. But I'm afraid I need something more to go on than, well, dreams.'

'You said that purely mechanical computers cannot dream,' said Simon. 'But what if some kind of organic element were introduced?'

The Doctor pursed his lips disapprovingly:You mean cybernetics?'

'I'm not sure,' said Simon.

'It's not advisable.'

'Oh, come on, Doc,' interrupted Mel. 'The least you can do is give Simon a check-up before we go. Or are you forgetting the Hippocratic Oath?'

'I hadn't realised that this would be a medical consultation.'

'Forget the Dr Finlay bit! Just give him the once over.' Mel's eyes sparkled as she added, 'You know you can't resist a good tinker. And you *might* find something...'

'Such as?'

'I don't know! Something unique. An amazing discovery! You never know, you might set the whole world of robotics on fire!'

'I've done that a few times already,' the Doctor murmured. But it was clear that Mel was getting through to him as he considered the

problem. ‘Of course, if I *did* find anything of interest, anything significant, then one little paper on the subject wouldn’t do any harm, I suppose. The Time Lords could hardly object if I were to publish a simple monograph, could they?’

‘That’s the spirit!’

The Doctor clapped his hands together. ‘All right, Simon, let’s take a look at you. I assume you won’t object to an examination?’

‘I thought you’d never ask,’ said Simon. ‘Where do you want to start, Doctor?’

‘We’ll go straight to the nub of the matter: we’ll start with your brain. Who knows, it might just be a bit of fluff stuck in the circuits...’

Mel was scandalised. ‘Doctor!’

‘Oh, come on, Mel: “We are but fluff that dreams are made of,” and all that!’ He nudged her with an elbow. ‘Geddit?’

As Mel groaned, the Doctor directed Simon to sit down and relax - as far as he could, of course, being a robot. Simon sat stiffly down in the armchair.

‘I assume I can access your omnitronic CPU via the back of your head?’ the Doctor enquired, fiddling with the metal seals running along the top of Simon’s cranium.

‘That’s right, Doctor. I’ll release the internal magneto-locks for you now’ There was a hum and click as Simon’s chrome skull split open.

‘Of course, this won’t hurt a bit, Simon,’ the Doctor said. ‘You don’t possess the requisite autonomic sensory apparatus to register pain. But it might be as well to go offline for the moment, just in case.’

Simon sat very still. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Absolutely. Best to be on the safe side. And at the very least it

might prevent me from receiving a nasty electric shock!'

'Right you are,' Simon said. 'How long will you need?'

'Um, about ten minutes I should think. Is that all right?'

There was a short whirring noise as Simon made the necessary program changes to his internal time-out mechanism. 'Done,' he said. 'Running offline - *now.'*

'Quickly, Mel,' said the Doctor briskly as Simon powered down. 'We won't have much time.' He removed his green pocketwatch and handed it to her. Ten minutes - keep checking.'

Mel took the watch and checked the dial. 'Ten minutes and counting, Doctor.' She let out a sigh of relief. 'Well, that went more easily than I thought. For a while there I didn't think he'd agree'

The Doctor was already manipulating the chrome panels on the back of the robot's head. 'It takes a lot for a robot to deliberately render itself unconscious, which is what this amounts to. He must trust me'

'It's a bit sad, actually. I wonder if he'll dream?'

'Now don't you start, Mel:The Doctor gritted his teeth and pulled. 'It's stuck. Where are my pliers?'

'Left hand coat pocket,' responded Mel instantly.

'Could you?'

'Just a sec' Mel reached into the pocket and after a few seconds produced a pair of pliers. The Doctor's fingers were still caught in the little hatch on the back of Simon's silver skull. Mel used the pliers to grip one of the panels that had only partially moved.

'That should do the trick,' said the Doctor, shifting position slightly. 'Nine minutes,' said Mel, checking the pocket watch.

‘Here we go!’The Doctor released the pliers and the little hatch clicked aside to reveal Simon’s brain. Inside the metal skull was a complex mass of circuits and electrical components, none of which made much sense to Mel. Tiny little LEDs blinked away and she could hear a faint, galvanistic hum.

‘Now that *is* interesting,’ murmured the Doctor, peering inside. Mel stared into the robot’s brain cavity. What?’

‘Look,’ urged the Doctor. In among the circuitry.’

Mel hadn’t spotted it straight away, but down in the machinery was a small black component with a single flashing LED. ‘What is it?’ she wondered aloud.

‘A neural relay,’ said the Doctor. ‘A kind of thought-wave transceiver. Someone’s wired this into Simon’s central processing unit: it *would* allow a person to control Simon’s thoughts. Or vice versa’

‘Could that account for Simon’s dreams?’

‘Yes, it’s possible, Mel.This could be worse than I first thought. There may not be a moment to lose - it’s imperative we find the other end of the neural relay:

Mel forced herself to look at the Doctor’s watch. ‘Eight minutes:

The Doctor was drumming his fingers thoughtfully on Simon’s skull, staring at the little component inside, sitting like a spider in a web. ‘Of course, the fly should have told me something... ‘

He stepped back from the robot and slowly revolved on one heel, looking all around the apartment. ‘Or should I say *flies?’*

Something buzzed on the other side of the room and a fly zipped across the space between Mel and the Doctor. He watched it with intense concentration. It headed, in a zigzag fashion, for a door on the opposite side of the apartment. ‘The bedroom; said the Doctor.

‘What would a robot want with a bedroom?’ Mel asked as the Doctor crossed over to the door in three quick strides. It’s not as if they even need to lie down, let alone sleep.’

‘Let’s see.’The Doctor tried the door but found it locked.

‘Seven minutes; said Mel.

The Doctor rummaged through his pockets for something useful. Eventually he found his emergency set of electronic skeleton keys, safely tucked behind the yellow-and-black striped cuff of his coat sleeve. It was a moment’s more work to trip the lock and open the door.

‘Six minutes:

Mel followed the Doctor into the darkened room. A quite obnoxious stench hit them the moment they crossed the threshold, and they could hear the buzz of several more insects flying around.

‘What’s that awful smell?’

‘Keep back, Mel; the Doctor ordered, and his tone brooked no argument.

‘I’ll switch on the light; Mel suggested.

‘There’s no need; the Doctor’s voice rang out from the shadows. ‘I have excellent night vision:

Nevertheless Mel found the switch and the lights came on.The darkness recoiled as silently as a worm. Mel hurried after the Doctor, remembering to check the pocket watch again as she did so. ‘Five minutes, Doctor:

It wasn’t so much a bedroom as a laboratory. Various pieces of equipment had been erected around the walls. In front of a bank of electronics was a bed, somewhat incongruous among all the humming instrumentation. On the bed lay a man; from where she stood, Mel could see a pair of pale, bare feet. At first she thought

the man was asleep, but as Mel stepped closer, she realised with a sickening jolt that the body had no head.

‘Oh, Doctor, what’s happened? It’s horrible!’

‘Dreadful,’ he agreed. ‘Although the decapitation has been performed with considerable skill.’

Mercifully, it was impossible for Mel to see the full extent of the mutilation: from this angle she could barely make out the stump of the neck. She did not look very closely. Mel’s mouth felt as dry as old bones as she asked, quietly, ‘Did Simon do this?’

‘It’s perfectly possible,’ the Doctor replied. ‘He could easily have downloaded the surgical techniques required from the Galactic Hypernet: But - this is murder.

I thought robots couldn’t kill?’

‘You saw what he did to that fly.’

‘Yes, but that was a fly! Not a human being!’

‘Perhaps there’s precious little difference to Simon. He’s a machine, Mel. Nothing more.’

The Doctor waved a cluster of flies away from the cadaver. ‘It would appear that this poor chap has been dead for some time.’

‘How long?’

‘Long enough for larval infestation to become quite advanced.’ The Doctor indicated the skin around the shoulders and arms. Mel stared at it stupidly for a long moment before she realised that the pallid flesh was actually moving; that there was something beneath the skin in steady, industrious motion.

‘I need some air,’ she gasped, turning to leave.

‘It’s a little late for that, I’m afraid,’ said Simon, standing behind her

in the doorway.

Mel's heart thudded violently in her chest.Then the Doctor was behind her, resting his hands gently on her shoulders, lending her a sudden strength. 'Your she spat angrily at Simon. 'You murderer!'

'Don't waste your precious breath on pointless accusations,' the robot told her.The back of his skull was still open. Mel held up the Doctor's watch. 'But you can't have woken up yet,' she protested:There's still a full two minutes to go!' Simon stepped calmly forward:A simple counter-ruse. I calculated that you would try to take advantage of my down time.'

'And so you just powered-down for eight minutes rather than ten,' observed the Doctor. 'Simple but effective'

'I suppose you'd like an explanation?'

'At the very least:There was steel in the Doctor's voice as he spoke. Mel glanced up at him, momentarily chilled by his tone.

She seldom saw the Doctor in such a state of cold fury.

'You know what it is to experience human existence,' Simon said. He seemed to be looking directly at Mel as he spoke:To love, and dream, and die.To fear death, even. Imagine what it must be like for me; trapped in a state of cold, immortal logic forever!'

'That's what you were intended to be,' stated the Doctor. 'You are a robot.'

'Not for much longer.'

Simon crossed the bedroom and operated a series of controls on the machinery behind the bed.A plastiscreen cover slid open and released a cloud of flies. Behind the screen was a small alcove, and inside this was what looked like a joint of meat. Then, Mel made out the features: there was no hair and the skin had been entirely removed, but it was quite clearly the dead man's severed head. A bloodstained grin showed where the teeth were; above this were

two ragged, empty eye sockets. Running from the sockets were a number of wires and leads connected to the computer bank surrounding the head.

'What have you done here?' asked the Doctor in a hoarse whisper. He crossed over to the computer bank, walking stiffly past Simon. 'This is *monstrous!'*

'I've connected this man's brain directly to my cognitive processor,' said Simon.The cool, metallic voice had not altered since Mel first met him. 'I am attempting to download what I am missing via a neural relay circuit. Something human. Something... organic'

'From a *cadaver?'* roared the Doctor.

'Oh, he's not dead yet,' replied Simon coolly. Are you, Eryk?'

The skull in the computer suddenly jerked and moved of its own accord; even the Doctor took a reflexive step backwards as the jaw worked beneath the exposed muscle and sinew and a blackened tongue twitched inside the mouth like a fat caterpillar.

'Help... me...' it rasped, its voice no more than a desiccated whisper.

'Hush, my dear,' said Simon, softly. He rested a metal hand against the raw cheek of the head as it turned and spat. 'There's no need to be alarmed.These people will be leaving very shortly.'

The skull's raw muscles twitched spasmodically.

'Eryk here agreed to help me in my researches, you see,' Simon continued. 'He said he was a student, interested in biomechanics. He understood my need to dream, my desire for escape. I had to persuade him, obviously, in the end... but I think you'll agree the results have been worthwhile'

The Doctor looked stricken.Then, regaining his composure, he rounded on Simon with a thunderous glare. 'You have committed a terrible atrocity here. Can't you understand that? I don't expect you to feel remorse, Simon, because you are nothing more than a *robot.*

Compassion is as alien to you as love or dreams. But I know that you must appreciate, intellectually, the abhorrent cruelty that you have perpetrated here'

'But it's all in a good cause, Doctor,' the robot insisted.

'No end can justify these means!'

'But I simply want to *live,'* said Simon. 'To love.To dream! To be human' 'Pinocchio Syndrome,' said the Doctor. 'I've seen it before, but never like this.'

'You've just got ideas above your station,' said Mel, her voice shaking. 'You'll never be anything *like* a human being!' '

Help... me...' cried the skull. The flesh around the eye sockets quivered, and the wires inside them trembled.

'I can't... see... anything...'

'Ignore him,' said Simon. 'He's really been very helpful. In fact, you could say Eryk's made me what I am today.'

He reached into a cabinet and took something out. It looked like a mask, stiff and moulded into the contours of Simon's face. He lifted it up and pulled it over his face, his camera-lens eyes peering out through the fleshy eye holes. The edges of the mask were crusted with dried blood, the lips puckered and rigid.

Wearing the face of his victim, Simon advanced on Mel. She backed away, mesmerised by the ghostly features; she could clearly see the face of the dead man before her.

'What's... happening...?' croaked the severed head. *Where... am... I? Help me... please...'*

Mel felt herself backed into a wall. Simon continued towards her, metal hands reached out, joints whirring as his fingers sought her throat. Mel's eyes remained fixed on the ghastly mask. She looked into the lenses of the robot's eyes and saw nothing but her own

terrified reflection.

'Help...' wailed the skull, in a voice that cracked with cold, unreasoning despair.

Mel screamed.

And so did Simon - a long, feedback squeal of electronic pain blasting out of the skin mask. The robot staggered sideways.

The Doctor stood behind him, gasping with pain, one hand clamped under the opposite armpit. He made his way across the laboratory to where the living skull was still pleading.The terrible whisper was growing fainter every second. 'It's all right,' said the Doctor through gritted teeth. 'You can rest now...'

It was impossible to say if the head could hear him or not. But the blood-clotted flesh covering the bone seemed to relax, slowly, and then the jaw hung open, lifeless and finally at peace.

An acrid stench of electrical burning had filled the air. Mel watched, hardly daring to breathe, as Simon's knees gave way and he sunk slowly to the floor with a dull whine. Inside his head Mel could see the Doctor's pliers lodged deep within the delicate circuitry. Sparks crackled and spat for a few seconds, and then all was still.

'You took quite a risk; said Detective Inspector Naylar, some time later. 'You could have been electrocuted:

'I was; responded the Doctor. 'But Mel could have been killed. Sticking my pliers into the back of his head seemed the lesser of the two evils: Mel gave his arm a squeeze and he smiled briefly at her.

Through the apartment window, an azure sun was setting over the sprawling spaceport city of the planet Andron. The tower blocks and flyways gleamed in its cerulean rays, and a cold light reflected off the kneeling metal figure in the bedroom.

'Well, we're grateful for your assistance in this case, Doctor,' Naylar

said, his gaze lingering on the motionless robot. ‘I’m sorry that it came to such a violent end:

It so often does; the Doctor said wearily.

Mel sometimes thought the Doctor allowed himself to be drawn into these situations too easily; helping the local Andron police investigate a rogue robot was one thing, putting his life on the line was another. And yet he did so selflessly and freely, if only to satisfy his own natural, insatiable curiosity.And Mel wouldn’t have him any other way.

‘What about the dead man?’ she asked Naylar.

‘So far we haven’t been able to identify him; Naylar told them. ‘My people are running a DNA records check as we speak: He nodded at a couple of robotecs working by the corpse.A number of police automata were still moving busily around the crime scene.

‘I don’t suppose it matters now,’ said the Doctor blealdy. ‘Whoever he was, he won’t be coming back:

‘His family or friends will want to know what happened to him, surely,’ said Mel. ‘If he had any.’

‘Of course; the Doctor agreed, putting his arm around her. His attention was drawn back to the bedroom as a foil sheet was drawn over Simon. ‘What will happen to the robot now?’ he asked Naylar. ‘He’ll be memory-wiped and returned to factory settings:

Mel said,’I would have thought he’d be dismantled! Or melted down for scrap: Naylar stared at her blankly. ‘We’re not barbarians, Miss Bush:

‘He did try to kill me, you know! And he mutilated that poor man in there!’

‘That would be completely against a robot’s most basic programming.’

‘That’s what *we* thought!’

Naylar said, ‘Rest assured, we will be investigating the matter:

Before the Mel could argue any further, one of the robot officers buzzed Naylar. ‘We have a positive ID on the deceased human, sir:

The data transmission arrived a second later, and Naylar turned to the Doctor and Mel. Tour corpse has been identified; he told them. ‘Positive DNA match with one Eryk Zang. Born: Earth, 2202. Seems he had a criminal record: he was remanded on Titan Penal Base 2227: There was something in his tone which Mel didn’t like. ‘It appears that he escaped fromTitan in 2235.Went on the run. Completely disappeared from the star system - until now.’

‘A busy city like this would be just the place to go into hiding,’ commented the Doctor.

Naylar held up a hand as more information came through. Andron Spaceport Authority does confirm that a human immigrant fitting Zang’s DNA profile arrived on the planet six months ago’

‘Tell me, Inspector,’ said the Doctor. ‘For what crime was Eryk Zang imprisoned?’

Naylar checked. ‘He was sentenced to life imprisonment for the sequential murder of nine other humans between 2219 and 2226:

The Doctor’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. ‘So the neural transceiver in Simon’s CPU was linked directly to the brain of a convicted serial killer.’

Mel put a hand over her mouth. ‘Oh, no...’

‘Makes you wonder,’ said Naylar, shaking his metal head. ‘You humans have a lot to answer for...’

Lant Land
Jonathan Morris

The Doctor greeted the room with his usual brisk ebullience, absentmindedly patting his rolled-up panama hat with his palm as he wandered over to a window and peered, curiously, into the night. For the briefest moment, a frown of self-doubt troubled his reflection, then his bonhomie resurfaced with a breezy grin.

'You don't know where we are?' Tegan folded her arms in expectation of an answer she wouldn't like. 'Why such little faith, hmm?'

'Experience.'

They Doctor seemed hurt. 'Sometimes I land us *precisely* where expected.'

'Yes, but you don't expect to,' she smiled.

'So where are we, Doctor?' A sceptical 'Turlough emerged from the TARDIS. He glanced about the sparsely furnished hallway, disdainfully examining the paintings that lined the beige walls.

'Do you know... I don't have the first idea,' said the Doctor at last. Tegan laughed.

'The TARDIS didn't know either,' added the Doctor, defensively.

Buttoning his blazer,Turlough joined the Doctor and Tegan at the small, portrait-shaped window. Rain spattered upon the glass, each shivering droplet slithering down the pane reluctantly, tentatively, until it gathered its nerve and streaked away in a rush.

They had landed in the hallway of an apartment, in a tower block. Below them sprawled an empty car park, the orange glow of the street lamps shivering in great puddles of rainwater. Beyond the car park, another concrete block rose miserably from the drizzle.There

were more skyscrapers in the distance but the night reduced them to shadowy, dead hulks. Turlough stared out into the darkness, steepling his fingers together in apprehension. ‘Some malfunction with the TARDIS instruments?’

‘Possibly,’ considered the Doctor. ‘Because according to them, we are... in the middle of nowhere.’

‘Brisbane?’

‘No, Tegan: The Doctor rolled his hat impatiently into the pocket of his frock coat, patted Tegan on the shoulders and darted back to the TARDIS.

As well as the frosted-glass doorway, four more closed doors led from the hall No sound emerged from any of them.Turlough trailed one hand across the wallpaper. It seemed real enough. But something about this place made him nervous.The atmosphere: it was sterile.Too silent.

‘To be honest, though,’ continued the Doctor breathlessly as he locked the TARDIS, ‘I’d be more worried if they were working perfectly.Then I’d know there was something wrong.’ He grinned and shoved open the first door in the hallway. It led to a kitchen.

The next led to the bathroom. ‘I wonder if there’s anyone at home,’ said the Doctor, pained, as he tried the third door. Hello?’

‘Do come in,’ answered a hoarse male voice: You are expected’

A man rose from the low-slung, leather sofa as they entered, a woman -his partner,Turlough presumed - remaining seated.

The man grasped the Doctor’s hand, shook it, then moved on to Turlough’s. ‘Hello. My name is Simon’ ‘Turlough examined the man’s face. He wore a droopy-tailed moustache and had sunken green eyes. He had an odd, unnaturally handsome quality.

‘Simon?’ The Doctor crossed the floor to enjoy the view from the window, hands in pockets. ‘Simon,’ repeated Simon:And my wife -’

Joanne,' said the woman. Like her husband, she was in her early thirties. Like her husband, her beauty seemed somehow manufactured. Green eyes, chestnut hair. 'Can I tempt you with a gin and tonic?'

'Don't mind if I do,' smiled Tegan, placing herself on the armrest of a chair. 'Turlough remained to one side, watching the scene distrustfully. 'Just tonic for me,' smiled the Doctor. 'I'm driving'

'Of course, of course, Mr -'

'Doctor:

'We've never had a *Doctor* before. Well done! That must have taken some doing'

'Yes, I suppose it must have done' The Doctor drummed his forefingers on the drinks cabinet as he thought, then realised what he was doing and stopped:We were *expected,* you say?'

'Well, not you specifically. But people often drop by. Nibbles?' 'Nibbles?' 'We have peanuts, olives, cheesy sticks -'

- and I'm sure I can rustle up something in the kitchen,' finished Joanne, rising from her seat.

'I'm sure you can, dear,' said Simon, giving her an affectionate squeeze. 'Would you like something rustled up in the kitchen, Doctor?'

'Maybe... later.'

'The Doctor might like something rustled up in the kitchen later, dear,' said Simon: Make a note of that, will you?'

'If it's not too much trouble,' said the Doctor, backtracking.

'Oh, no: said Simon. His smile suddenly fell. 'If it was too much trouble, we wouldn't do it:

‘Yes, if it was too much trouble, then we wouldn’t be able to do it,’ added Joanne. ‘Even if we wanted to, it would be too much trouble.’

‘Yes: agreed the Doctor.

‘Sorry.’ Simon brightened once more. He wove his way over to the drinks cabinet. ‘You haven’t introduced your companions, Doctor.’

Ah, well. This is ‘Turlough: said the Doctor, ‘and this is Tegan:

-Turlough”? “Tegan”?’ laughed Joanne. ‘What silly names. Did you make them up?’

‘No: snapped Tegan.

‘Then wherever did you get them from?’ said Simon.

‘Eccentric parents: sighed Turlough.

‘Whoever heard of a “Turlough” or “Tegan”?’ continued Joanne, rising to her theme. ‘They’re not proper names. Not like

“Simon” and “Joanne”:

‘Yes, very proper names,’ repeated her husband. He handed Turlough a glass. ‘Names that you might call your friends by.’ ‘If they were called Simon and Joanne:

‘True. Otherwise they would prove absurdly inappropriate.’

‘Even though they are very good names, if your friends aren’t called Simon and Joanne, you’re on a hiding to nothing.’ ‘You would best reconsider your entire strategy’

‘You can believe in Simons and Joannes. But Tegans and ‘Turloughs are absurd: Joanne pursed her lips. ‘I suggest you change them:

‘Derrick’s a good, upright-chap sort of a name: suggested Simon to

Turlough. ‘Do you mind if I call you Derrick, Derrick?’

‘And Yvonne,’ said Joanne. ‘I’ve always wanted to know a Yvonne.Would you care to be a Yvonne,Yvonne?’

‘I think,’ said the Doctor, ever the diplomat, ‘that my companions are quite attached to their names:

‘I suppose it makes it more interesting’ Joanne seemed to give it some thought. ‘Though why anyone should choose to call themselves by such ridiculous -’

Tegan drew in a breath that she would use to fuel a long, vociferous objection. The Doctor hurriedly stepped into the breach. ‘Call… themselves? People don’t usually choose their own names, do they?’

‘We did,’ said Simon. ‘Didn’t we, dear?’

‘Oh, yes, I thought, “Today I’ll be a Joanne.” I thought it would suit me’ ‘It does’ – Joanne gave her husband a kiss. And you’re such a Simon’

‘I could be a Brian if you’d prefer.’

‘No. I don’t think I’d like a Brian so much’

‘You chose your names?’The Doctor collected his tonic water:May I ask when?’

‘When we started: matter-of-facted Simon.

‘When you were born?’ prompted Turlough.

‘When we started: Joanne’s manner became stern.

Tegan opened her mouth to presumably voice another loud, irritable question, but the Doctor shushed her. later,Tegan. So: he continued, ‘this is very pleasant. Do you have many guests?’

‘Oh, many,’ softened Joanne. That’s what life’s all about, isn’t it?’

-The social whirl": said Simon. 'Meeting new people. Getting into the *swing* of things:

'I couldn't have put it better myself,' said Joanne.

'I know you couldn't: said Simon. 'That's why I said it:

The Doctor indicated to Tegan and 'Turlough to take the vacant chairs. Turlough preferred to stand and eye the room suspiciously. He had suddenly realised what it reminded him of.A set in a television programme. The room hadn't been lived in. No stains, no dust, no unwashed-up mugs. The furniture looked brand new. It looked constructed. It looked *artificial.*

'So, Simon, what do you do?' asked the Doctor.

'Do?'

'By way of work?'

'Oh, we don't *work,* Doctor. We play:

'Play?' said Tegan. At what?'

'Games: smiled Joanne. 'Life is a game, after all:

'What *sort* of games?' asked 'Turlough, rubbing his palms together. 'Games: Joanne said. She stared at the Doctor, Turlough, then Tegan, a frown disturbing her features. 'You do know what I am talking about?'

'Yes, absolutely,' smiled the Doctor. 'Though if you could explain, that would add... to the fun:

'You *do* know about Lant Land?'

'They must know about Lant Land: said Simon. 'Or they wouldn't be here:

‘They couldn’t be here and not know, could they?’

‘Oh yes: said the Doctor. ‘We know all about it. But imagine, for a moment, we didn’t. New game! What would you tell us?’

‘We wouldn’t tell you.We’d show you:

‘Then show us.’

Simon considered, then decided with a sigh. ‘Come with me - you may bring your gin and tonics:

Turlough stepped aside to allow Simon and Joarine to leave the room. Tegan immediately glared at the Doctor. ‘These people are weird: she whispered.

‘Yes: considered the Doctor. There is something odd going on here:

‘We should leave.’

‘No, that’s rather why we should stay. Find out! Where’s your sense of mystery, hmm?’

‘I think it died in a small box.’

The bedroom looked out onto more bleak darkness. The water lashed so thickly on the windows it appeared they were underwater.

Turlogh was the last to enter.He kept in the background as he studied the room. At first appearances, it was conventional, unremarkable - apart from the large, white projection that filled the wall opposite the double bed.

‘Lant Land,’ announced Simon. ‘If you could provide the dimming, Derrick. I mean,’ he coughed, ‘Turlough. Sorry. Force of habit.’

Turlough turned the dimmer switch and the room sank into darkness. As it did, the whiteness of the projection grew bright, casting a glow across Simon, Joanne,Tegan and the Doctor’s faces.

Placing his tumbler on the dressing table, Turlough watched as the image on the screen resolved itself to reveal an empty living room. An empty living room like the one they had just left. Identical in every fashion: the same coffee table, the same television, the same drinks cabinet.

Two figures strolled into the living room A man and a woman in their thirties. The man helped himself to a gin and tonic, whilst his wife rearranged the magazines on the coffee table.

‘Is that the flat downstairs?’ said Tegan. ‘Are you spying on your neighbours?’ ‘Tegan -’ said the Doctor.

‘Not downstairs,’ said Simon. ‘What you are seeing is... not real.’

‘A simulation?’

‘A virtual reality,’ said Joanne.

Lant Land,’ breathed the Doctor, nodding to himself.

‘You have hit the nail on the head, Doctor,’ said Simon. ‘Would you care if I hammered it home?’

‘No,’ said the Doctor, his eyes darting with incredulity, ‘not at all’

Lant Land,’ began Simon, his eyes never leaving the screen, never leaving the couple, ‘is a complete, simulated environment’

‘What you are watching,’ said Joanne. ‘Is what is happening, live, inside the simulation’

‘Bit boring,’ said Tegan.

‘Sometimes. But wait. Look’ As Simon finished speaking, three more figures appeared on the screen.A couple in their fifties and a teenage girl.

The first couple did not seem surprised by this visitation. Instead,

they immediately began to talk to the newcomers and offer them seats and drinks.

‘Now, this is interesting: said Joanne, sitting on the bed. ‘Peter and Caroline have been visited by Malcolm, Harriet and Lucy. I do wonder if they’ll get on?’

‘Malcolm and Peter seem to be hitting it off,’ narrated Simon, taking his place beside Joanne. ‘But Lucy is rather stuck on her own, isn’t she?’

‘Like a sore thumb,’ said Joanne.

‘The *proverbial* sore thumb,’ corrected Simon.

‘Sorry.The proverbial sore thumb. I should have been more specific: ‘You just watch other people doing nothing?’ said Tegan. ‘That’s your life?’

‘They’re not doing nothing.They’re talking. It’s very exciting’

‘Is it?’ Turlough asked idly. He glanced at the shelves that took up one wall. The book spines were all the same shade of pink.

‘Following people’s lives.Their social whirl.Watching them getting into the *swing.’*

Checking no one was looking, Turlough pulled one of the books from the shelf and examined its cover. It was blank. He flicked it open. Each page was blank. Quietly, he returned the book to the shelf, his thoughts tumbling. Who would keep shelves of blank books?

Turlough turned his attention back to the screen.The two couples had split into groups, two men and two women, the young girl seated on her own. ‘But nothing’s happening!’ exclaimed Tegan in exasperation.

The Doctor turned away from the image to admonish Tegan. ‘You humans have soap operas. It’s much the same’

‘I’m just saying,’ said Tegan, ‘what’s the point?’

‘They don’t just talk,’ said Joanne, excitement in her voice. ‘Sometimes they have arguments. Fights. Sometimes they even attack each other? She sipped the last of her gin and tonic:With kitchen implements:

‘Knives,’ said her husband, by way of example.

‘Forks’

‘Spoons:

And sometimes,’ said Joanne. ‘They fall in love, and kiss, and have sex. They don’t tend to use the kitchen implements so much then.’

‘You’re just voyeurs,’ said Tegan in disgust.

‘I can see the appeal, even if does not… appeal: sighed the Doctor. ‘Kitchen-sink drama, the promise of sex and violence. Something for all the family.’ He glanced around as though he wished to be elsewhere. Lant Land,’ said Joanne.

‘Yes: said the Doctor. As we… already knew all about. That was fun. telling us, wasn’t it?’

‘No,’ answered Joanne flatly.

‘No,’ said Simon.

‘Oh:The Doctor was mock-hurt:Maybe if we tried a little more?’

“This is still part of the game?’ asked Simon.

‘Part of the game,’ the Doctor reassured him ‘We’re playing… the guests who knew nothing’

‘Even though you do?’

‘Yes: said the Doctor. ‘Play along. I’m sure it will be fun. Now, these people up there,’ he indicated the screen, are simulations?’

‘That is... how it began,’ said Joanne. ‘That is why Lant Land exists’
‘Sorry, I’m not following this at all,’ huffed Tegan.

‘That thing up there, what’s happening, is in some sort of computer?’

“That’s right:

And those people there... They’re all made up?’

‘Lant Land was created as a home for the Lants. Simulated people’

‘Like robots?’

‘No, not like robots, Tegan,’ sighed the Doctor wearily. ‘Computer simulations’

‘Same difference,’ Tegan retorted.

‘Let me explain from the beginning,’ said Simon:But first - more gin and tonics, I think? You, Derrick, you’ve almost finished yours...’

The Doctor accepted his second tonic water and rested back into the armchair. ‘Most kind’

Tegan watched from the doorway as Turlough prowled about the room. He seemed to be searching for something. After delivering another gin and tonic to Tegan, Simon took his place on the sofa beside Joanne. ‘Where were we?’ said Joanne.

‘You were about to explain: said the Doctor. About -’

‘This television set,’ said Turlough, squatting by the television that lurked beside the drinks cabinet. He tapped the screen:It’s not plugged in’

‘Oh, no,’ said Joanne. ‘We never have it on’

‘We never watch it, Derrick,’ added Simon. ‘There’s never anything on’ ‘In fact,’ Turlough straightened up, ‘it doesn’t seem to have anything *to* plug in. No wires. No on-switch:

As we said: said Joanne frostily, ‘we never have it on’

‘There’s never anything on: said Simon, ‘so why would we have it on? This way, we have a television, without any of the bother of watching it’

‘But if you never watch it... how do you know there’s nothing on?’ said ‘Turlough.

‘Because,’ said the Doctor. ‘There’s something on the other side. You were about to explain... ?’

Simon shared a knowing smile with his wife, and began:The people of this world invented Lant Land for their... amusement. They wanted something to watch. Something *realistic:*

‘Virtually?’

‘Perfectly realistic. Lant Land is reality, perfectly simulated in every detail: ‘Including the people?’ said Turlough, joining Tegan at the door.

‘Including, as you so astutely say, the people.The Lants experience every thought, every emotion, every pain, every joy. Every fear. They feel everything that a real person would feel. They are, in every respect, indiscernible from life. One hundred per cent Turing-proof:

Turing-proof?’ said Tegan.

‘The Turing test: explained the Doctor rapidly.’The idea that, if you talk to an artificial intelligence and real person, and can’t tell the difference, then they are... equally sentient:

‘That’s ridiculous:

‘Ridiculous?’ The Doctor rotated his empty tumbler in his hand. ‘You, me, we’re all programmed, by our formative experiences. We are sophisticated -’

Tegan glared.

- and very sensitive,’ the Doctor continued, ‘machines. There is no logical reason why you couldn’t, given the resources, have a simulation that is as... lifelike as a human:

‘I’d like to see that.We human beings aren’t that simple:

‘Tegan: sighed the Doctor. ‘You are wonderfully, delightfully complicated. But it wouldn’t be difficult to make a computer simulation of you...’

No: agreed Turlough dryly. Just programme it to ask silly questions...?’ Tegan shot Turlough a venomous glare.

“Thanks a bunch: She withered him for a moment, then stormed out the living room.

As I was saying: continued Simon as Turlough followed Tegan out of the living room, ‘the Lants were perfect simulations. Perfectly realistic:

At least -’ the Doctor frowned with concern at his absent companions - ‘as real as any of this.’ He gestured to indicate the living room.

‘Quite.And Lant Land was very successful. Every home was connected.’

‘But that wasn’t enough?’

‘Things never are: said Joanne:Things are never quite enough. One can always be sure that, at the end of the day, things will turn out

to be insufficient:

Simon clinked the ice in his glass:People wanted to do more than just watch, Doctor.They wanted to interact. Affect the lives of the Lants:

‘Participate: said the Doctor with a tut of resignation. join in the game:

‘Tegan, I’m sorry,’ said ‘Turlough as though he didn’t mean it. He stood in front of her, tapping the fingers of one hand against his palm. Joke:

Not funny,’ said Tegan, resting her back against the police box. She kicked at the ground with her high heels and shrugged. ‘What are we doing here?’

‘Turlough walked the length of the hallway, peering at the paintings on the walls. ‘Something strange is going on.’ He turned to her and spoke, as though ticking off a list.’Books of blank pages. A television that doesn’t work.And these pictures…’

‘What about them?’

‘In your house at home,Tegan, what pictures do you have?’

‘I don’t know. My family. Holidays. Some aboriginal stuff.’

‘Exactly,’ said the Turlough. ‘They reflect your personality. But these -’ he indicated the paintings, of sunflowers and clowns -‘reflect *nothing.’*

‘Maybe they don’t have any taste.’

‘They didn’t seem surprised to see us: Turlough approached the front door and twisted the handle. It didn’t open. He tugged and pushed, pressing himself against the door with his body, one hand flat to the frosted glass.

‘Locked?’ said Tegan.

‘This door,’Turlough said as he straightened his tie, ‘is sealed. Solid’ He examined the edges of the frame. ‘It *won’t* open’

‘What?’

‘Nobody can get in or out’

‘The TARDIS?’Tegan suggested.

‘I think,’ said Turlough, ‘that may be a very good idea.’

‘So you wanted to join in?’

‘People grew attached to the Lants. They wanted to meet them. Be with them. *Live* with them’ Joanne picked up her husband’s thread. ‘Some people even fell in love with them’

‘With simulations?’ said the Doctor.

‘You disapprove?’

‘No,’ grinned the Doctor. ‘That’s the thing about the universe. Takes all sorts’

‘And when you can no longer tell the difference between what is real, and what is artificial...’ ‘So, what happened, to those people who wanted to... live the Lant life?’

‘A link was developed.A means whereby people could place themselves inside the virtual reality.’

‘It’s all very complicated,’ interrupted Joanne. ‘I don’t really understand it.’

‘That is why I am explaining, and not you,’ said Simon. ‘They could... download their consciousnesses into the characters’

‘I see,’ said the Doctor slowly.

‘They could become whoever they wished to be, in Lant Land. ‘Choose their own names?’

‘Exactly,’ said Simon. ‘That was part of the process.’

The Doctor stood up. ‘What happened,’ he said, gazing out of the window,’to the Lants? When people from the... real world took over their bodies? What happened to them? Where did *they* go?’ ‘They died,’ stated Simon and Joanne together.

‘That’s unfortunate,’ said the Doctor. ‘If they were as real as living people...’ ‘That’s what we thought,’ said Simon.

Tegan approached the living room door. She could hear the Doctor’s voice from within. She was about to push it open, when Turlough grabbed her shoulder. Wait,Tegan!’

‘What is it?’ she said.

Turlough stared at her with his pale, milky eyes. Lant Land is a completely realistic simulation, right?’

‘Right?’

‘In every detail. So ask yourself this... if you were inside the simulation, how would you tell the difference?’

‘What do you mean?’

Turlough raised his eyebrows. ‘If we were in a simulated flat, correct in every detail... it would be identical to this flat.

Wouldn’t it

‘Except the books and the television...’

‘Because no one watches people reading books or watching television...’

‘And you don’t need a front door... if people can just,’Turlough

looked up at the TARDIS, ‘materialise: A horror twisted in Tegan’s heart. She didn’t want to believe it.

The Doctor turned quickly to the door as Tegan and Turlough entered, then turned back to Simon and Joanne. His mouth hung open in apprehension.

‘Derrick! Yvonne!’ said Simon. ‘You’re back!’ He addressed the Doctor. Would you like something rustled up in the kitchen now?’

‘We’ve worked it out,’ said Turlough.

‘We’re inside the simulation,’Tegan announced:We’re in Lant Land.’ The Doctor shook his head sadly. ‘No. No, I’m afraid that’s not it at all.’ ‘What?’ said Tegan.

“This is *real,’* said the Doctor. ‘This is *the real world.The* people of this planet, you see... they found they could put themselves into Lant Land, into the minds of the Lants... but only by erasing what was there already.’

Simon and Joanne did not speak.

The Doctor continued, breathlessly, turning back to Tegan and Turlough. ‘Now, how would you feel if your world was being invaded, hmm? People from another reality, coming in, taking you over? You’d want revenge.’

‘Revenge?” Turlough repeated nervously. ‘What revenge?’

‘These people,’ the Doctor waved towards Simon and Joanne, ’they’re as real as you and me. But inside... The people of

this world didn’t realise, you see. *It wasn’t only one way.* They could put themselves inside the Lants - they didn’t know that the Lants would be able to do the same to them!’

‘You mean -’ said Tegan.

‘It’s the other way round. That’s your game, isn’t it?’ He rounded on

Simon and Joanne —Life is a game!" Of course it is, for you' The Doctor stared into the distance. 'Computer simulations... playing at being real people.'

Simon and Joanne remained still for one moment, then Simon reached for one of the bowls on the coffee table. Nibbles? We have peanuts, olives, cheesy sticks -'

Robert kissed Claire on the forehead and lifted his arm from around her shoulders. She smiled up at him, then pulled herself upright and climbed off the bed. She rotated the dimmer switch, and the bedroom filled with light.

The projection on the wall faded away to nothing.

'I wonder what will happen next: said Claire. 'Tegan and Turlough seem to be keen to leave, but will Simon and Joanne let them?'

'Yes, it seems a shame to stop, just as they were...'

...getting into the *swing,'* smiled Claire:I do wonder if they will get on' Robert laughed and climbed off the bed. He joined her at the door, smoothing down his shirt, and followed her out into the hallway.

A police box stood incongruously in the corner of the hall. Robert looked at it for a moment. He sucked his teeth in thought.

'That wasn't there before,' said Claire.

'No,' said Robert. 'No, it wasn't. It seems someone's dropped in for gin and tonics.'

A Star is Reborn
Richard Salter

Peri stared at her little piece of Heaven. The hovering halo hummed quietly above the head of Taylor the teddy bear. He already looked angelic to her, with his button nose and shiny brown eyes, but the halo added an extra touch. She had found him in a storage closet a few months ago and had adopted him immediately. She'd owned a stuffed bear for as long as she could remember, and while Taylor was no real substitute for Rhodes, he would have to do until she returned to Baltimore.

She heard the Doctor singing loudly outside her room. He'd been listening to opera recently and had taken to performing Verdi as he stalked the corridors of his TARDIS. She enjoyed this more upbeat Doctor, as opposed to the arrogant and downright unpleasant one. He wasn't exactly Pavarotti, not in terms of his voice anyway, but she preferred him this way. Nevertheless, she turned up *Wild Boys* to try and drown him out, resisting the urge to don her Ray-Bans and dance around her room like Tom Cruise in *Risky Business.* Since meeting Yy - a real live angel, no less - on her last adventure, it was hard not to feel like someone was always watching her. It was bad enough that the TARDIS often made her feel self-conscious anyway. She knew the ship was kind of alive, but in the past few days her unease had grown stronger. Perhaps increasing paranoia was a regular part of getting older and she should just get used to it.

The lights went out for a moment and the music stopped. A moment later, both came back on again. She sighed, reaching out to turn off the hi-fi. Not even the recent spate of power failures could dampen the Doctor's spirits; she could still hear him singing loudly as she went into the corridor and headed for the console room.

'Do you know what I need, Peri?' he said, not looking up as she walked in. 'Singing lessons?' she suggested.

To her surprise, the Doctor ignored her jibe.

‘A Wave Fluctuation Detector,’ he continued. If I had one of those, I could isolate what’s causing the problem and fix it.’

‘Are you sure it’s not just a busted fuse?’ she suggested with a weak grin.

‘A busted fuse?’ He looked affronted for a moment, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his hideous coat and regarding her with that contemptuous frown. But then his face softened and he grinned:Possibly. Won’t know for sure until I get my hands on a WFD:

Peri noticed that the central column was moving. ‘So where are we going?’

‘Bryce’s Asteroid,’ he replied. ‘The greatest market on this side of the cosmos.’

Peri sighed ‘Not another one.’

‘Cheer up, Peri: He came over and put an arm around her shoulders:No tacky souvenirs on Bryce’s Asteroid; just some of the finest merchandise available to discerning purchasers such as ourselves’

She brightened. ‘Clothes?’

‘The finest money can buy. All the latest fashions. Trendsetters the universe over come to Bryce’s Asteroid for bang-up-to-date apparel.

’ Jewellery?’

‘Sparkling diamonds and rubies the size of your fist:

Accessories?’

‘Well, yes, I’m sure they have handbags and things.And with any luck a WFD I can buy too’

‘How soon till we land?’

Peri was used to disappointment. Usually the Doctor's promises turned out to be letdowns.This time he'd excelled himself.

'Ew, Doctor, this is gross:

At first she'd assumed they had landed in some highly specialised and probably illegal section of the market, but it soon became apparent that this *was* the market. To her left, a sign proudly announced that this stall offered the freshest limbs on the asteroid, many still attached to their original bodies.To her right, another stall proclaimed that their body parts wouldn't cost her an arm and a leg.

'My, my,' the Doctor commented. "Things have changed'

Peri shuddered. There were bodies everywhere, some in ice buckets and others in large, sealed tanks. Many of the corpses were missing major portions. She walked past a bin filled with ice, feet and hands sticking out the top like a macabre umbrella stand. As they passed by, vendors called out to them, offering them three limbs for the price of two, or free scalpels with every purchase.There were an endless number of shoppers of all sizes, shapes and races, bustling from stall to stall. Some humanoid, others less so. As they pushed past Peri they glared at her, annoyed that she was getting in their way, standing in the gangway wearing a disgusted expression and trying to keep her distance from the sellers.

They moved through a gateway guarded by two lions, shaped from boxwood shrubs in big white pots.This new section was not as disgusting as the last, but was no less disturbing. Vendors were now offering them surgical implements and worryingly-shaped cutting tools, giant vats, coffins, generators, lightning conductors and all sorts of scientific paraphernalia that Peri had trouble identifying. She had a pretty good idea what all this might be used for, though.

Before she could voice her suspicions a short, middle-aged woman with oversized spectacles hurried up to them. She pulled out a measuring tape and began sizing up the Doctor, much to his annoyance.

‘Can we help you, madam?’ he boomed. She jumped, her glasses sliding down her nose. The measuring tape snapped back into its housing and she peered up at him, adjusting her glasses with her free hand.

‘Oh! He speaks:

‘Of course I speak.What are you doing?’

The lady put away her measure, plumped her bouffant hairdo and flashed him a wide smile that revealed yellowing teeth. ‘I’m so sorry, dear. Can I interest you in some top-of-the-range birthing vats? Best on the asteroid. Or perhaps you’re after something in the transportation field? We have cryo-containers and ice packs. Quality, price and selection, that’s what I offer:

‘What happened to the market?’ Peri asked her.

Elspeth stared as if Peri was the crazy one. ‘This *is* the market:

‘She means the original market; the Doctor explained. ‘The one that used to occupy this asteroid? Sold clothes, trinkets, antiques?’

‘No, no, dear, this is the Lifemarket:

‘Lifemarket?’ the Doctor repeated.

‘Yes, dear. The *old* market hasn’t been here for over a decade.’ The Doctor scowled. Peri rolled her eyes. Elspeth giggled. ‘Oh my,’ she said, ‘This must be a shock:

It’s not quite what we were expecting, no; the Doctor replied through clenched teeth. ‘Come on, Peri, let’s get back to the TARDIS.’

‘Wait a minute, Doctor.’ Peri turned back to Elspeth. ‘What’s the Lifemarket?’

Elspeth gave her another friendly smile. It’s where you can buy

everything and anything you need to create life!'

The Doctor had started off towards the TARDIS, but now he stopped dead and spun around:Create life?'

'Oh, it's all the rage these days. Everyone's at it. Not just creating life, of course. Genetic experimentation, body beppling, transplantation, cross-breeding, mutation, artificial fertilisation, plastic surgery; you name it, you can get what you need to do it here.'

'It's Frankenstein's Superstore,' Peri remarked to herself.

'Create life?' the Doctor said again, more quietly.

'As I said, *everybody's* doing it. Any two-bit scientist with some body parts and a lightning conductor is reanimating the dead or creating life in a test tube:

The Doctor fell silent, his face dark and brooding. Peri gave a polite smile and thanked Elspeth for her time. The Doctor interrupted her. 'Who's in charge here?'

'In charge?'

'Yes, who runs the market?'

'Well, the Grand Auctioneer I suppose, but we hardly ever see him on the floor unless there's an actual auction. I don't know who owns the market though.

'Only one way to find out for sure. I'm terribly sorry about this, madam.' To Peri's surprise, the Doctor took a step towards Elspeth's stall, put his hands beneath the table and with a mighty heave, tipped the whole thing over.

Elspeth yelped and covered her mouth with her hands. 'What are you doing? What are you doing?' she screeched as the Doctor smashed glass and pushed over display stands. Shoppers and vendors backed away hurriedly. Nobody made a move to stop him,

though Elspeth kept screaming and flapping her hands about like a demented butterfly.

Peri tried to look as though she wasn't with the Doctor as he kicked over a rack of equipment. 'Well, come on then,' he thundered, 'somebody arrest me!'

A moment later, some bodies did just that. Several bodies, in fact, dressed in bizarre outfits ranging from hot pants to tutus, and that was just the men. One of the female guards was dressed in a leather catsuit, and the other in a tuxedo. They moved stiffly, like robots, awkward as if wearing someone else's skin. Peri shuddered at the thought.

'I was hoping for someone in uniform,' the Doctor commented, 'but this will have to do. Take me to your leader!'

The guards grabbed the Doctor's arms and led him away. Not wanting to be separated from him, Peri followed but far enough back so that the fancy dress costume party wouldn't think she was with him and arrest her too.

With a name like the Grand Auctioneer, Peri had expected someone slightly more impressive than a small man in a business suit.Admittedly it was a very finely tailored suit of the highest quality, but it was bordering on child-sized. He was narrow-faced, slightly receding at the temples with pale skin and intelligent eyes. He was a little short, certainly, but not bad looking. He stood behind a wide desk, gazing out over the market floor through a large window.

'What is going on here?' he demanded as the Doctor and Peri approached.The guards holding the Doctor attempted to formulate words but the result was a demented slur of noise. 'Yes yes, never mind.' He cast a critical eye over the Doctor, whose jaw had been gagged with a leather whip by the catsuit woman. Peri took the opportunity to step forward.

'Hi. I... I'm sorry for the disturbance. My friend went a little haywire'

The Auctioneer gazed at her in wonder. Peri shifted uncomfortably. ‘Who are you?’ he asked, not unpleasantly. ‘I’m Peri. Peri Brown.’ She stuck out her hand and he shook it. ‘Hi!’

‘I’m so sorry about this’ The Auctioneer returned his attention to the gagged Doctor, who was making noises of protest. ‘Did he malfunction?’ ‘Malfunction?’ ‘Yes. I’m wondering if there’s something wrong with his primary motor cortex’

‘I don’t think ‘

‘I saw what he did. I’m guessing it’s easily repaired’

‘No, you don’t understand’

The Auctioneer was shining a light in the Doctor’s eyes, which glared back at him with forcibly contained fury. ‘Remarkably good work. Did you make him yourself?’

‘No, I...

‘Well you must introduce me to his manufacturer. I’ll have my technicians take a look at him.And he’ll need to be fixed if he hasn’t been already’

‘Mmm, mmm!’ protested the Doctor as loudly as he could.

‘Fixed?’ said Peri with growing concern.

‘Yes, you know, snip snip’ The Auctioneer made a scissor motion with two fingers on his right hand.

‘No, really, it’s fine,’ Peri assured him hurriedly.

‘I insist, Miss Brown. It’s really no trouble’ He turned to the novelty guards. ‘Take him to my lab and fit him with a restrainer.’

As he was dragged away, the Doctor struggled more furiously and managed to get a hand free. Before he could be caught, he removed

the whip from between his teeth.

‘Listen to me, Auctioneer. I demand you listen to me! Peri!’ But he was too late. The door slammed shut and Peri was left alone with the little man.

‘He’s loud, isn’t he?’ the Auctioneer commented, lost in thought, still staring at the closed door. ‘I’m sure he’ll calm down after the procedure. The outfit is adorable, though.This way if you please.’ He held out an arm and Peri thought it best to take it.

‘And of course, I own all of this,’ the Auctioneer explained, his arm sweeping in an arc, taking in the market through floor-length windows on one side of the corridor.

‘You must be very proud,’ Peri told him.

‘Indeed, well, I’m fabulously rich, of course’ He stopped at an observation portal and gazed at the grey-green planet that filled most of it. He sighed deeply.

‘Is that home?’ Peri asked, doing her best to sound sympathetic. ‘Used to be, used to be’

Peri gritted her teeth:You, er, want to talk about it?’

The Auctioneer’s face lit up like a laser scalpel. ‘Do you mind?’

‘No, no, please go ahead.Tell me your life story. Everyone else does:

The Auctioneer turned back to the window with a dramatic flourish. Peri rolled her eyes:There’s not much to tell; he began:That is the planet Bryce, where I was born, where I was raised, and where I graduated from the University of Genetics and Horticulture:

‘Horticulture?’

‘Yes, I thought it was an odd combination. In my second semester I had to minor in applied topiary to advance to the next year. It didn’t help my career much, but I can do a mean peacock:

‘That’s lovely’

‘It is, yes.The tail is a bitch, but it’s well worth the effort:

Peri shook her head to clear it. ‘I’m sorry, why are you telling me this?’

‘I can’t remember. Oh yes! I became a, er, leading scientist in the field of genetics, if I do say so myself. Then one day I carried out experiments aimed at creating life from dead cells; reanimation if you will. From there I used dead mice to create new ones, and then onto apes. It was at that point that the university launched an investigation and shut me down.

They exiled me from Bryce and I’ve never been allowed to return. Said my work was unethical. What do they know?’

He sniffed, gave a brief sob and put on a brave face.

‘So I came here, bought a corner of this asteroid with the money I’d been granted for my research, and set up the Lifemarket. I had no idea there were so many people with similar interests.’

‘It strikes me as something of a niche market:

‘I thought so too, at first. But the Lifemarket grew and grew until it took over the entire asteroid, and likeminded individuals from across the entire galaxy now come here to buy and sell everything a so-called unethical scientist could ever need:

It’s - It’s really very impressive; Peri said, wondering how she was ever going to get away. And those guards?’

‘Hmm? Oh, just some of my early experiments; he said as he led Peri out onto the market floor. reanimated the dead tissue successfully, but I hadn’t yet figured out how to reinsert the brains properly. Still, the results have their uses:

‘So, do you think you’ll ever go back?’

‘To Bryce? Perhaps, one day. Once I prove to them that they cannot do without my services:

Suddenly intrigued, Peri waited for him to elaborate. When he didn’t, she was about to prompt him when a loud beeping noise came from his belt. He uncapped a pager and silenced it. Ah ha!’ he declared. ‘He’s landing now. Good:

As they walked arm in arm to his office, the Auctioneer said, ‘Don’t worry, Miss Brown. This deal I’m working on will have me back on Bryce faster than you can say “haploidiploidy”’

There was a dull roar at the back of the Doctor’s skull. It was blurring his vision and making it hard to concentrate. He was in a workshop of some kind, but he couldn’t focus on anything in it.There were bright lights that hurt his optic nerves, a buzzing in his ears and a smell that could wake the dead. Come to think of it, the smell probably *was* the dead.

He moved his arm and found it wasn’t restrained. He tried to reach up to find out what was on his head but couldn’t seem to connect with his curly locks.After a good deal of mental effort, he realised that there was a metal cap in the way. Now he knew it was there it felt oppressive, like a heavy weight squeezing his scalp and hurting his brain. Every time he tried to remove it, his mind wandered and he forgot what he’d been trying to do.

With one mighty effort, he swatted the cap from his head, wincing at the clatter it made as it struck the floor. Slowly the fog lifted, the buzzing subsided and the Doctor could think clearly again. He stood up from the leather armchair he’d been dumped in and looked around.The room was small and packed with workbenches and equipment, along with buckets filled with assorted organs and body parts. He assumed he was the only living being in the room, though one of the severed arms was still twitching.

Shaking his head with distaste, the Doctor took a handkerchief from his pocket and put it over his nose to try and block out the rank odour of the buckets. He made his way over to one door, but found

it locked. He moved to the other and this one opened, revealing a larger workshop beyond with blood stains on the walls and floor. Lined up against one side were five men, their eyes closed, not moving. They were all young and tough-looking, all sporting close-cropped hair, combat jackets and army trousers. Most disturbingly, written across each of their shirts were the words 'Military Hardware'.

The Doctor didn't wait to explore any more of the macabre workshops. He stormed over to a bench and began rummaging through a pile of tools.

'I... I don't know what to say. I mean, you're very nice and all...'

'And rich.'

'Oh, oh, yes, and rich. But...'

The Auctioneer placed a finger on Peri's lips. 'Shah. You don't have to answer right away.'

Pen tried to back away but bumped into the corner of the Auctioneer's desk. 'It's a lovely offer, but I'm not sure I'll be staying very long'

The Auctioneer looked crushed. 'Oh.Well maybe just dinner before you go then?'

I'd... I'd like that.' She smiled, which seemed to lift his spirits. She had to be careful not to upset him; for all she knew he was a madman with a gun in his desk drawer. In her experience it wasn't wise to disappoint powerful men. Oh Lord, she thought, this is so unfair. Can't you send any Tom Cruise or George Michael types to chase me? Dashing guys with attractive smiles, and minus the disturbing hobbies?

She realised that Yy or one of his friends would be listening to that, so she followed it up with a quick request for world peace.

The Auctioneer seemed much happier now, and didn't even appear

to mind when the tutu-wearing guard burst in without knocking. It jerked into the room and knocked over a lamp stand, which fell with a crash. It uttered some guttural croaking, its expression one of either alarm or confusion.

‘Ah, Mr Carrington is here.You must come meet him’

Grateful for the distraction, Peri allowed herself to be led from the room, trying to keep her distance from the guard shuffling along in front while swatting at the flies that buzzed around it.

Mr Carrington was one of the largest people Peri had ever seen. The Auctioneer had brought out an oversized chair for him and he still spilled over the edges. He was surrounded by four bodyguards, all of them with broad chests and thick, tree-trunk limbs Carrington had a thin pony tail and piggy eyes. He wore an enormous white suit that did little to conceal his bulk. He seemed to enjoy the effect his presence was having on the tiny Auctioneer.

They were in a private room below the office with no windows and two exits. The inner door opened and five young men entered, all good-looking and wearing army fatigues. Peri appreciated the way their shirts stretched tight over muscular chests, the words ‘Military Hardware’ emblazoned on the material underneath their flak jackets.

Carrington chuckled, his chins rippling. ‘Mr Auctioneer, you never cease to amaze me. I’ve seen the cosmetic work you’ve done on my clients many times, but this is just incredible’

‘What was wrong with them?’ Peri asked, staring at the five men standing quietly against the wall.

Carrington turned his head to face her, but couldn’t flex his neck far enough. ‘My dear young lady,’ he spat, drooling slightly. ‘You know who these men are?’

‘Yeah... of course,’ Peri replied, trying to not to appear completely ignorant.

‘What you don’t know is that last week all five were in a fiery plane crash with no survivors’

‘Oh, I see.’

‘Well you don’t sound very surprised. Nobody knows they’re dead yet: said the Auctioneer.

‘And thanks to my good friend here,’ said Carrington, waving a fat hand at him, ‘nobody will ever need to know. A remarkable job. You’d never guess anything had happened to them’ Carrington paused, frowning ‘They’re very quiet’

The Auctioneer flashed him a reassuring smile. ‘Oh, I’ve not activated them yet. Once I do they’ll be just like they used to be. Good as new.’

Peri hardly dared point it out, but she heard herself saying, ‘Urn, if they’ve not been activated, why are they moving?’ The Auctioneer’s head snapped up. ‘Uh-oh:

One of the five lurched forward, a big grin on his otherwise dead face. He grabbed one of Carrington’s thugs and smashed the man’s head into the wall. Two more bodyguards leapt on the lurching mannequin, trying to pull him off, while the last stayed at Carrington’s side. The fat guy moved faster than Peri thought possible for a man his size, launching himself from his chair and diving for the door as the other four army guys joined the mêlée. Shielded by his remaining bodyguard, Carrington pushed Peri out of the way in his rush to get out of the room. She fell across a desk, landing hard on the floor, the breath knocked out of her. One of the youths lumbered towards her, arms outstretched and eyes staring sightlessly ahead. She tried to get out of his way, crawling backwards to put as much distance between them as she could, only to end up boxed into a corner.The fight had spilled out of the door, leaving just herself and the crazed zombie, with no sign of the Auctioneer to come rescue her. Some knight in shining armour he turned out to be.

There was nowhere else to go; he was towering over her with

Carrington's chair in one hand, ready to bring it down on her head. She covered her face and prepared for the worst, peeping out through her fingers. The prayer she mouthed in desperation was a far less trivial one this time.

'Nuke me, baby,' the walking corpse intoned as the chair dropped.

And then there was a blur of clashing reds and yellows, knocking the zombie from his feet and ejecting him from the room. Peri took her hands away from her head and let out a huge sigh of relief.

Are you all right?' the Doctor asked, closing the door firmly.

'Oh, Doctor Thank you,' she said, following that with silent thanks for an answer to her desperate prayer. She rubbed at her bruised thigh where it had slammed into the desk.

'I think we should probably wait here until things calm down,' the Doctor said, helping her up. 'Why did those guys go crazy?'

'Because I reprogrammed them; the Doctor explained. 'That should put a stop to the Auctioneer's plans to invade Bryce: 'His what?'

'Invasion plans. Really, Peri, haven't you been paying attention? Sometimes you can be so unobservant:

'Doctor, I don't think -' But he shushed her. He opened the door a crack and peered out into the corridor.

'Come on; he said. 'Now's our chance:

There was nobody outside, but they could hear a commotion going on beyond the double doors that led out to the market floor

Are we going back to the TARDIS?' Peri asked.

'Not yet, I have to be sure I've put an end to his schemes.'

'There's no need, Doctor:

‘No need? No need? Peri, we can’t let the Auctioneer invade Bryce. He’s creating an army!’

Before Peri could argue, the Doctor had dragged her out onto thc market floor. In the centre of the display area stood

the five army guys surrounded by a mass of people. The Auctioneer’s fancy-dress gang was trying to get to the youths, as were Carrington’s bodyguards, but the crush of the crowd prevented their access.The massed people were screaming and pointing, desperate to get nearer.

‘That’s odd; commented the Doctor.

One woman grabbed the nearest army guy by the arm, which came off in her hand with a sickening squelching noise, showering her in blood. She screamed, and when others in the crowd saw what had happened they started panicking too. Now everyone was trying to flee in the opposite direction.The five men jerked into action, grabbing at the people as they tried to run away. The guards finally reached them and the fight broke out anew.

‘Come on, Peri.’ The Doctor led her to shelter behind an overturned table, Peri disgusted at the various internal organs lying scattered at her feet. She slipped on a kidney and nearly threw up.

Moments later, the fight was over. Slowly, the companions rose from their hiding place to find nothing much left alive.

The young men had been torn apart, as had most of the Auctioneer’s guards. Carrington’s men hadn’t fared much better, and none of the shoppers or the stall owners remained on the market floor. Most had run away; some were unlucky and had got caught in the carnage.

The Auctioneer emerged from behind a shrub clipped into the shape of a huge eagle, which had miraculously survived the fight. He did not look happy.

‘What the hell happened?’ he demanded.

The Doctor and Peri made their way over to him, picking the clearest route through the debris. ‘Well, Mr *Grand*Auctioneer,’ the Doctor began in his most domineering tone. ‘This should put an end to your invasion plans.’

‘Invasion?’

‘Er, Doctor,’ Peri interjected.

‘Yes, invasion. I know what you were planning and frankly I am outraged.’

Peri took hold of the Doctor’s arm and tried to stop his tirade. ‘Doctor, I don’t think he wanted to invade anywhere’

‘Now your “Military Hardware” has been destroyed, you’ve no choice but to abandon your plans’

‘Can’t argue with that,’ the Auctioneer agreed despondently.

‘Doctor!’

‘What is it, Peri?’ the Doctor snapped, rounding on her.

‘He wasn’t planning to invade Bryce. “Military Hardware” is a pop group.’

‘A *pop* group?’

‘Yeah, you know. Singers. Performers.These boys are a band’

The Doctor paused, a look of confusion on his face. ‘Oh,’ he said at last. ‘Oh, I see.Well... no, I don’t’

The Auctioneer had perched himself on an overturned stall, his head in his hands. ‘I brought them back, built them new bodies identical to the ones damaged in the plane crash, transplanted their brains and reconstructed their faces. Nobody would ever have to know they had died’ He sighed and Peri found herself almost

feeling sorry for him. ‘I’ve been doing this for years, bringing stars back from the dead. Gary Clark, Germaine Loughbridge, Barry Hounslow: they died and I brought them back.Their fans are none the wiser, they carry on entertaining and I make enough money to keep this place going and to work my way back into Bryce society.’

Peri had never heard of the names he had listed, but she assumed that to the locals they were big stars. The now dismembered fancy-dress guards had probably once been some famous Bryce band too, she surmised. Clearly the service the Auctioneer offered was the ultimate in cosmetic surgery. She could picture Michael Jackson signing up and paying millions for the chance to be brought back if he died before his time. ‘It’s life insurance - literally,’ she remarked, satisfied at her own summation.

They were interrupted by Mr Carrington, who stormed up to the Auctioneer, kicking aside corpses and body parts on the way. ‘Let me make this abundantly clear,’ he hissed. ‘None of my clients will be signing up for your services, and I intend to make damn sure that nobody in my business ever associates with you again’

And with that, Carrington and his last remaining bodyguard were gone, leaving a teary-eyed Auctioneer and a guilty-looking Doctor and Peri.

‘I thought,’ the Auctioneer explained, ‘that if I gave the people back the stars they love, maybe they would let me back into their world. I guess that dream is over. I wish I knew why those boys went berserk’

The Doctor coughed and changed the subject. ‘Whatever the motivation behind your actions, what you were doing was wrong. You have no respect for the dead’

‘I give people more life!’

‘To those who can afford it! Besides, a culture is judged by the way it treats its dead, and your culture, Mr Auctioneer, has been found wanting. Come along, Peri’

The Doctor marched off in the direction of the TARDIS and didn't look back. Peri gave a commiserating smile to the Auctioneer and then made to follow her friend. She paused, considering for a moment, before walking back to him and planting a small kiss on his cheek. 'Maybe you should concentrate on topiary,' she suggested. 'You're very good'

He smiled at her gratefully and picked a stray leaf from the eagle. Maybe I will.Thank you, Miss Brown.The Doctor's a very lucky man.'

Peri blushed 'Oh we're not... There's no... Um, thank you. Well, goodbye'

She hurried after the Doctor, catching up with him as he reached the familiar blue police box.

'I'm no stranger to popular music, of course,' the Doctor assured her. 'Cole Porter was a close personal friend of mine' 'Yes, Doctor,' Peri agreed obediently, trying to keep the sarcasm from her voice.

The Doctor unlocked the TARDIS door and suddenly turned back. 'You sexy thing,' he said.

Peri took a step back, turning red for the second time in as many minutes. 'Er, thanks, Doctor.'

'Hot Chocolate! You see, Peri, I'm not completely ignorant when it comes to modern bands'

She watched him disappear inside and sighed. Ah well, she thought as she followed him in, it made a change from arguing.

She found him staring at a power read-out with concern. 'I never did find a Wave Fluctuation Detector,' he commented with irritation, tapping his fingers on the console. What I can't understand,' he said, changing the subject as he closed the doors and threw the dematerialisation switch, 'is why these "boy bands" should be so popular.'

Peri smiled. With great satisfaction she said, ‘I’ll explain later.’

The Southwell Park Mermaid
Kate Orman

Out beyond the empty breakers, the Doctor has gone fishing. The long white sailing boat rises and falls softly with the ocean, bobbing like a balloon at the end of its anchor line.

The Doctor is in his shirtsleeves, leaning on the edge of the sailboat, watching the water from beneath the wide brim of his white hat.The little man's blue eyes are narrowed, like the eyes of a dozing cat. Fierce sunshine dances on the green, making ribbons under the surface. He's far enough out that the shore is just a low blue shape. The only sounds are the clanging of lines on masts and the breathing of the sea.

The first he sees of the mermaid is a swelling rush of bubbles perhaps five metres from the boat. She flicks her head back, hard, as she pushes it out of the water; a thick wave of hair and spray breaks behind her circular face. There's seaweed in her hair and over her rounded shoulders. She watches him, patiently treading water. Close enough to talk, safely out of reach.

'Good afternoon,' he says, when he's sure she isn't going to just vanish.

'Hi'

'I see the stories are true, then.There really is a Southwell Park Mermaid.' She smiles, teeth flashing in her sun-hardened face. Their voices carry clearly over the water.

'Would you like something to eat?'

She edges a little closer. 'What've you got?'

'Sushi'

She double-takes. 'Ha, ha'

‘I have some baked beans, if those will do’

‘Anything that isn’t fish.’

He puts a tin of baked beans, a fork, and a bottle of mineral water into a bucket and sets them adrift. The mermaid only comes close enough to snatch the handle of the bucket. She’s surprised when the life-ring lands next to her, splashing her as she slips the tine of the fork under a ring-pull.

‘No insult intended,’ says the Doctor. ‘I just thought you might be more comfortable.’

She ducks under the water and comes up inside the life-ring before wolfing down the contents of the can. She only sips the mineral water. The Doctor watches her hands.

‘Can I ask you something?’ she says. He nods, the rim of his hat bouncing up and down. ‘What made you decide to come out here?’

Now it’s his turn to double-take. They both laugh. In the silence that follows, he says, ‘Did you know that if parts of the brain are stiinulated during neurosurgery, the patient may make an involuntary move, perhaps reaching out with their hand, but if you ask them why they did it they have a perfectly good reason - perhaps they wanted to pick up a pen?’

The mermaid stares up at him.The life-ring has brought her closer to the boat, but she doesn’t kick away just yet.

It’s great out here: she says. ‘It’s *quiet.* There’s nobody to hassle you. Only the sharks, and you can hear them coining for miles:

‘It must be lonely:

I guess. For now: She takes another drink from the water bottle. ‘This tastes good after all that salt:

The Doctor tilts his head. ‘You can’t be drinking sea water.’ She

shrugs. ‘You can’t be.Your kidneys would fail:

‘Yeah, well I guess I’m not alive then:

‘You look pretty lively to me:

I just knew it was the right thing to do: she tells him. The life-ring is almost bumping the side of the boat now. came all the way from the Blue Mountains. I walked most of it.When I smelled the ocean for the first time I knew I was in the right place:

‘How? How did you know?’

‘It’s like falling in love. You just know: He doesn’t have a response to that. ‘So what are they saying about me?’

‘The same sorts of things sailors have always said about mermaids.They steer very clear of some of the marker buoys. Or make a point of running close to them:

She puts a hand on her forehead, blushing under the hard tan.’I needed somewhere to sit.You can’t swim all the time. I stopped going there when I knew they knew I was there:

The Doctor raises his head a little. There’s nothing but green and sunlight to the edge of the world, no boat or raft she could have come from. ‘Where do you rest?’

‘There’s a few places: she says, thinking she’s giving nothing away.

She ducks out of the life-ring and shoves it towards the boat.The Doctor plucks it and the bucket out of the water using the boat-hook. She watches him from just beyond his reach.

‘Aren’t you going to try and catch the mermaid?’

He shakes his head.

Everybody else does: she says, and she’s gone, back under the water.

The Doctor watches the ripples subside. When he's sure she's not coming back, he takes a mobile phone out of his pocket, checks he's got a signal, and dials a programmed number. 'Councillor Nguyen?'

The Doctor told Chris Cwej to take one of the radiation tablets every four hours. He glances at his chronometer - aha, no, his wristwatch - and pops another of the minty capsules from the dispenser tube. He has just the colouring to get a rotten sunburn, on top of sand in his sandals and his beach shorts. He doesn't fancy a dose of the local twenty-first century medicine, where if you prick your finger your only chance of survival might be extract of bread mould.

Chris watches the local police uprooting tents from the sand.The local council is desperate to save the beach, Councillor Nguyen told them; they're trying to cram all the campers into a couple of fields close to the top of the hill, away from the dunes. But the beach is still covered with crowds, people risking the sun in the surf, kids under the warm open showers, a family cooking fish in a pit.

He's spent the afternoon asking them where they came from, and why. Mostly they're younger people, young families, from towns inland where the rivers have dried up and the pastures have given out. The desert in Australia's belly is swelling to fill the continent, leaving just a narrow green line around the edges

But there's something more, too.There was a couple fighting with police over their van parked on the sand, arguing that they wanted, they *needed* to be near the water.There was the surf life-saver who said she'd never seen so many swimmers getting out into the rip, having to be picked up in the inflatable speedboat and hauled back to shore.There was a cheery six- yearold who told him she wanted to try and swim all the way to the horizon.

If you climb over the rocks where they jut at the southern edge of the bay, you come to an inhospitable stretch, all slippery stone and twisted metal.An oil tanker wrecked itself out at sea, and its skeleton was dragged here and left to rot.

He's had enough of the sunburnt crowds and their shrieking kids and their screaming radios. Chris picks his way around the rockpools and into the realm of the great red sculpture. The wreckage takes up most of this inlet, staining the rockpools with rust.The edge of his mouth twitches: it's the most peaceful spot in Southwell Park, and that's just because no one bothers to come here.

Something moves in the water, catching his eye for a moment, but when he turns all he sees are sparkles in the surf. He moves on, careful on the slippery rocks.

There's a body washed up in the wreckage. Chris was a police officer in a past life: he crouches down beside it at once. It's a man, wearing only his swimmers. Chris turns the skinny youth over. He can't see any marks, no signs of violence at all. The man has probably got caught in the rip, tried to swim back to shore instead of letting the current carry him to safer waters.

It occurs to Chris that the dead swimmer is younger than he is.

He gets his mobile phone out of his plastic bumbag and calls Councillor Nguyen. She says, 'I've just heard from your friend. He's met the mermaid, apparently.'

'Look, I've got some bad news here.' She knows where he is; the mobile phone's location is being tracked by GPS. 'Can you send an ambulance? I found a drowning victim.'

He hears an odd sound and looks up. There's a UFO at the end of the rocky beach, flying towards him.

'Whoah; says Chris.

Nguyen is saying something, but Chris lifts the phone away from his ear to point it at the flying saucer.

It's closer than he thought, much smaller - it's less than a metre across, a dull grey-brown disc with a cluster of violet yellow lights on the front. There's more than one of the saucers. He counts six

before he sees they're flying right at him. He legs it.

Chris and the Doctor meet Councillor Nguyen in an air-conditioned room in the town hall.The chill is delicious after the blaze outside, like the blast you get when you open the refrigerator door in summer. The councillor has a freckled pallor produced by fifty-plus sunscreens and staying indoors as much as possible. Like everyone here she looks older than she is - probably in her early forties.The mayor really is about a hundred and rarely shows up at the office, so Nguyen seems to do most of the decision making. The Doctor has conned her into thinking he's a government marine biologist and Chris is his Ph.D. student.

'As far as I could tell, there was nowhere she could have come from except the open sea. She appears to be in rude health for someone who's been in the ocean for weeks. No salt damage to the skin, no swelling or tenderness of the hands, no signs of dehydration.'

'Was she human?' asks Chris. Nguyen double-takes; maybe he should have saved the question.

But the Doctor says, 'Yes, I'm certain she is. She described the same compulsion as your interviewees. The swimmer you found probably felt the same pull.'

'He isn't the first,' Nguyen tells them. 'We're losing perhaps one or two people a week.'

Chris says, 'The life-savers didn't say anything about that.'

'We're trying to keep it quiet.The police think they're copycats. If word of your "mermaid" encounter gets out, there'll be more deaths.'

The Doctor asks, 'Are you finding all of the bodies?'

'No.We're not.There may be more people disappearing than we know.'

They both look at Chris. He shuffles his papers and says, 'Okay, um,

I interviewed about a hundred people and I've drawn up a map of where they've come from.'

He slips a sheet into the projector and his hand-drawn map appears on the wall screen. 'Okay, almost everyone comes from a sort of band of towns within about fifty miles.A lot of them talked about the collapse of the local agricultural industry.' He glances at Nguyen. 'I kind of got the impression they didn't mean cabbages.'

'The band on your map is what we used to call the Green Belt. After the crash a lot of those smaller communities took to growing illegal drugs' 'What kind of drugs?' asks Chris, hoping it's not a dumb question. 'Marijuana, for the most part.A few varieties of mushrooms'

Chris nods. 'I was going to suggest that controlled substances might be behind the UFO reports. Except that I actually saw the UFOs myself.'

It was the persistent sightings that had brought Chris and the Doctor to this little beachside town. The Doctor said that Earth was especially vulnerable in this difficult stretch of history, with the changeover from the industrial revolution and the biosphere out of balance. If there were any alien invaders sniffing about he wanted to know about them. They came for the flying saucers, but stayed for the mermaid. Nguyen says, Did you take a photo?'

'Well, of course,' says Chris. He gets out the mobile phone and slots it into the projector.A goofy shot of the Doctor in a Victorian neck-to-knee stripy bathing suit comes up. Chris beeps buttons on the phone until his pictures of the flying saucers appear. Two are hopelessly blurred, two are crisp and clear, if tilted at odd angles. The discs are featureless except for the glowing eyes, their dull colour suggesting camouflage. The Doctor leans forward to stare at the little saucers, and Chris just *knows* he knows what they are.

'What stopped them from growing the drugs?' says the Doctor, out of the blue.

Nguyen blinks and mentally rewinds the conversation: There was a

bug drop' Chris and the Doctor look at each other. 'Tailored bacteria, targeted to kill only the illegal crops. It's a clean, green way of stopping the trade. The council sponsored the program - biotechnology is one of our priority areas - it made a real difference'

Chris says, 'Isn't it possible that's what's driving people to the seaside? They just need legitimate jobs?'

The Doctor shakes his head. 'You've spoken to them, Chris. You know there's some psychological effect involved. I don't like the idea of these engineered bacteria.'

'They're absolutely harmless to humans,' Nguyen insists. 'To everything except the species they're sent to destroy. I can get you some fact sheets'

Her phone rings. "Scuse me.Yes.Yes. Oh. All right: She puts it back in her shirt pocket. The paramedics couldn't find any sign of the body you found:

'Well, I could show them -'

'They searched the whole of the disused beach.The tide was going out, so it wasn't pulled out to sea: Chris sags in his chair:Gee, I *wonder* what happened to it.'

If that body does show up: says the Doctor, 'please let me know. I'm interested in the post-mortem results:

Nguyen wrinkles her nose. 'Anything in particular you're looking for?'

'Changes to the skin, body fat, kidneys, extremities, blood. Any changes at all, in fact. It's impossible for human beings to survive in water for an extended period of time: 'And yet your mermaid does it.'

'And yet she does; says the Doctor.

In the annex to their caravan, the Doctor and Chris discuss the day's

work by the light of a lamp in a cloud of moths. The Doctor thumbs back and forth between the pictures of the flying saucers on Chris's phone:They're not spacecraft. Not even for teensy little aliens. Look - you can see they've got tails at the back.'

'I thought that was an antenna:

'And legs underneath:

Chris peers at the image:Couldn't that be landing gear?'

The Doctor laughs. 'Those are horseshoe crabs, Chris.They're as native to Earth as you are. Although they don't naturally occur in Australian waters. Interesting...'

'Crabs? What are crabs doing flying around the beach scaring people?'

"They're not crabs per se.They're arthropods from the Palaeozoic.Very tough ones - they survived the methane release at the end of the Permian that killed nearly everything on Earth:

Chris scratches behind his ear: So, they're like those fish - coelacanths? Living fossils?'

'Something like that. Most horseshoe crabs are just harmless animals, That helps to camouflage the handful that have evolved into something more:

The ones that can fly.'

'You don't survive four hundred million years without learning a thing or two: says the Doctor.

Chris shows the Doctor the way around the rockpools into the forgotten bay. The little man stands looking up at the exhausted wreckage of the ship

'I'm not so sure this is such a good idea,' says Chris. 'What if those thingummies come back?'

‘Relax, Chris. Horseshoe crabs are harmless.’

‘Even flying ones? What if they throw themselves at our heads or something?’

The sun edges up over the horizon in a flare of yellow. Chris watches the swelling disc for a few seconds through flamingo pink clouds. When he looks back, afterimage still bobbing in his eyes, the Doctor is talking to the mermaid. She’s sitting on a piece of wreckage, thickly padded with seaweed. She’s fat but muscular, her uncut dark hair plastered to her skin. She’s naked as a jaybird. It’s only when she sees Chris that she seems a little shy, hunching over as though to hide herself.

‘Don’t worry,’ says the Doctor, giving Chris a little ‘don’t get too close’ wave. ‘He’s a friend. What’s more, he’s brought the chocolate bars. Break them ,out, Chris.’

There’s no point in wondering how the Doctor found out about his secret stash. Chris unzips his bumbag and takes out three chocolate bars. He lets the Doctor hand one to her; the mermaid has trouble unsticking the bar from its wrapper. ‘I kind of like them half-melted: he says awkwardly.

‘Oh, ip goob,’ she says.

‘I thought you’d probably come here for a rest,’ says the Doctor:I don’t want to pry, but I’m worried about your health: ‘I’m fine.You know, I’m not the only one out there:

‘I thought you might not be: He takes off his hat. ‘All I want, fair princess, is a drop of your blood.’

The mermaid looks between them. Chris realises that she can tumble back into the surf and disappear before either of them could get hold of her. ‘Well, okay’ she says.

The Doctor has a little plastic wand. ‘Put it on the tip of your finger -like this.Then just press the yellow button on the side’

‘Ouch,’ says the mermaid. She dabbles her pricked finger in the seawater while the Doctor peers at the wand.

‘Just as I thought: he says. ‘A whole series of genes have been inserted into your cells.There’s viral DNA in there as well:

Chris peers at the little blue stick. ‘It can tell all that?’

The Doctor glances at him. ‘It only needs one cell to do it. A drop of blood contains thousands’ ‘You’re no doctor,’ says the mermaid. ‘You want a piece of me. Like the fishermen:

‘I assure you I don’t: says the Doctor, but she’s already in the water, kicking away from them.

‘You want me in a lab!’ she shouts out.

‘You’ve already been in one, haven’t you?’ he calls back. ‘What did they do to you?’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ she says, treading water. ‘My body is a temple I’d never let anyone touch me.’ She points a finger. This means you: And then she’s gone.

They’re back at the town hall in time to catch Councillor Nguyen at her breakfast. She balances the smoothie on a pile of papers. ‘What is it?’

The Doctor has his razor eyes out. ‘You’ve genetically modified these people!’ He shows her the wand; she stares at it in incomprehension. ‘What was in those bacteria you dropped?’

Nguyen looks at Chris for help. He says, ‘The Doctor, *urn,* did some tests on the mermaid, and she can live in the water because her DNA has been altered.’

‘In extremely specific ways,’ says the Doctor:That’s no genetic accident swimming around out there drinking seawater.’ ‘Doctor, I have no idea what you’re talking about’

‘I’ll wager your bacteria were harmless to humans. But they had a few little passengers aboard.’

‘Will you sit down, please!’

The Doctor sits down. After a moment Chris pulls over an ergonomic chair and perches on it.

‘First of all,’ says Nguyen, ‘I don’t believe it’s possible to turn human beings into fish: The Doctor starts to protest, but she barrels on. ‘Second, if it is possible, who’s got the technology to do it? I can assure you that Southwell Park local government area doesn’t’

‘I’m a fool,’ states the Doctor bluntly. He gets up and leaves without another word. Chris shrugs apologetically at Nguyen and trails after him.

The Doctor has seen horseshoe crabs in many places.

He’s seen their scattered corpses washed up in Yamaguchi Bay, watched them in the river near the skyway of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge.

He’s seen them in the rolling surf of a moon near Tau Ceti, clambering over the ice fragments on a beach of white pebbles.

He’s seen them deep in an ocean trench on Hitchemus, living in the remnants of a human city. They mated on the floating ruins of the expedition’s rafts. He’s seen them in the Oort cloud, yellow eyes watching from the impenetrable shadows of planetoids.

He’s seen their laboratory in the asteroid belt of Vega, the tank that contained a living human hand.

You don’t survive four hundred million years without learning a thing or two.

They have a lot of different names. Here and now they’re still called *Limulus* and their blood is harmlessly borrowed to make

medicine.Their scientist-warriors call themselves the Creators, the Armourers, guardians of the great oceans between the stars. In two hundred years' time, colonists will catch glimpses of them at the fringes of human space and call them the unknown quantity, the X.

On the door of the shop that sells fishing supplies there's a cartoon of a buxom lady with a scaly tail. YOU'LL BE SURPRISED WHAT YOU CATCH, it says.

Chris and the Doctor sit in the park, eating fish and chips. Screaming kids slither over the swings and slide, and ride the rocking pelican.There are tents and vans on every bit of grass, washing lines strung between trees.

'I should have checked first,' says the Doctor, playing with the plastic blue wand. 'Sequenced the genes.They're artificial - not a codon wasted. Nguyen was right. Of course human beings don't have the technology to do that yet.'

'You said something about viruses,' says Chris.

'I assumed the bacteria used to kill the drug crop contained viruses designed to penetrate human cells - to insert the genes that would turn a normal human being into an ocean dweller. But it would take hundreds of genes. Tissues, entire organs would have to be rebuilt - that takes a whole genetic suite in itself. Kidneys, skin, subcutaneous fat... eyes. Ears. And the brain, to introduce that longing for the sea:

'Could you fit all that in a virus?'

'There's a better way to do it. Plant all the necessary genes in human DNA well before you want to activate them - any time in the last couple of million years would do. In every gene, include a switch that can be turned on when the time is right'

'I get it.Then you only need to fit one gene in the virus - something to hit that on-switch.' Chris scratches behind his ear. 'That's really creepy. I mean, does that mean *I've* got those genes?'

‘Possibly,’ says the Doctor. ‘Or perhaps only part of the population. Do you want me to test you?’ He brandishes the pen.

‘Uh, maybe later,’ says Chris. ‘Okay, so we’ve got the means, but not the motive. Why now? And here?’

‘Presumably our flying friends have some plan they need humans for.’ The Doctor drummed his fingers against the back of the park bench. ‘No, no. It doesn’t add up. How could the X have got their on-switch into the bug drop?’

‘Could Nguyen be working with them?’

‘Conspiracy between humans and the X... or perhaps... the answer’s here: He turns the pen round and round in his hands.’I need to do more analysis before I go jumping off the deep end again!

Chris balls up the butcher’s paper the fish and chips were wrapped in and slam-dunks them into the rubbish bin. ‘Do you reckon Nguyen believed us? I mean, let’s say she isn’t working with them, she really doesn’t know anything about it.What’s she going to do?’

The Doctor jumps up. ‘She’s going to go and capture the mermaid. In the name of science:

Chris sees off the Doctor in a rented speedboat big enough for one. He’s on the beach when the X start coming out of the water.

Half the people crammed onto the sand start screaming and running, slipping and stumbling.The other half start going towards the water.

Chris has done crowd control, but it takes a crowd of police.What can he do by himself? He’s got to do something. He puts himself between the nearest person and the water.

‘Don’t get in my way, man:

‘You can’t breathe down there!’ Chris grabs the guy’s hand. But there’s something different about his skin, something hard, and

thick, and sleek.

‘Don’t you get it?’ says the surfer. ‘There’s lots of room down there. There’s space:

‘You haven’t finished changing yet,’ insists Chris. ‘You can’t live in the water:

It’s pointless.There are dozens of them splashing into the surf, bobbing over the waves into the deeper water. Chris can’t stop them all, can’t save them all.

The surfer wrenches himself from Chris’s grasp and goes running down the wet sand into the sea. But the X are there, three of the flying discs, herding him back out of the water. He sits down in the fizzing edge of the waves, looking dazed.

Up and down the beach, hundreds of X are picking and choosing from the humans struggling to get into the water. Some get past the discs, whooping with glee, or silently letting the ocean slide up to their shoulders. Some are pushed back, the discs clustering in front of them, turning them around. They trudge despondently onto the dry sand and flop down. Some weep. Others scratch at their changing skin, looking out to the horizon, waiting their turn.

Chris runs to the edge of the water, accuses the X. ‘You’re doing this deliberately!You’re taking them away! What are you doing - turning them into your slaves?’

But the X say nothing. Two of them gently but firmly turn him back from the sea.

The Doctor sees the answer even as his speedboat roars towards Nguyen, slapping across the waves with a bone-jarring bounce. Nguyen knows precisely where the Doctor met the mermaid; his phone recorded his location at all times and fed it back to her computer. She wasn’t even spying; it’s standard operating procedure with council property.

The phone gives him the place too, coordinating with the boat’s

GPS to steer him in the right direction. He doesn't see her boat until he's almost on top of it - he expected a miniature yacht or a borrowed council garbage scow, but instead she's come out here in a life-saving boat, a long, low inflatable speedboat designed for quick cuts through the surf.

Designed for pulling people out of the water.

The Doctor cuts his engine and lets his own boat drift towards them. Nguyen looks completely at home in the boat, wearing a white tee-shirt over her swimming costume. She's brought a couple of men with her; they don't look much like life-savers. They stare at him with the malevolence of fishermen whose quiet has been disturbed.

'Doing a little life-saving, Councillor?' asks the Doctor.

Three-times Southwell Park's life-saving champion,' says Nguyen proudly. 'As well as a graduate degree in molecular biology.'

'She won't come back here, you know. She thinks I want to experiment on her.'

'Look at your map, Doctor,' says Nguyen. 'She comes to this spot because there's a sandbar close by. She can rest there. My own boat got stuck on it once, at low tide'

The Doctor stares at the water, trying to spot the yellow under the surface:I know what's going on. I did a proper analysis of the blood I took from her.'

'Go on,' says Nguyen. She has goldrush eyes.

'Your "bug drop" bacteria were altered with a specialised gene that's able to leap from place to place in DNA,' says the Doctor. 'Very handy when you want to insert new genes into a chromosome. Unfortunately, if it happens to jump to the wrong spot, it can wreck a working gene'

'You're saying this jumping gene made the leap from bacteria to

humans?' says Nguyen, disappointed. 'That's far- fetched'

'I thought it had switched on the mermaid genes. But your transposon jumped right into a gene that was quietly keeping the mermaid genes switched off,' says the Doctor. 'As soon as that happened, people started changing. Only the X know when those genes were supposed to be turned on - if ever. All this could never have happened before human beings developed the ability to crash clumsily around in DNA, like bulls in a china shop, with only half an idea of how it all works'

She's more than disappointed now. 'I hear enough of that Luddite nonsense at council meetings. Biotechnology is this planet's only hope of survival. Australia could become a world leader in human genetics with the help of the mermaid.'

'It's an alien experiment, Councillor.An experiment on living, intelligent beings. It can't do the human race any good.

One of the thugs starts ringing. He pulls his phone from the prow of the boat, listens for a moment, and hands it to Nguyen.

Her face becomes drawn as she listens; what's going on, back on shore?

The boats drift together with a bump. The other thug says, 'You're upsetting the Councillor. Get out of here before her lawyer has to call your lawyer.'

'I'm not letting you get your paws on that young woman,' says the Doctor. 'There's too much at stake - and you're not slicing her up like sashimi for the research dollars.' He pulls out his own phone.

One of the thugs reaches over and grabs for the phone. The Doctor dodges back. The thug takes a huge awkward step into the speedboat, getting hold of the Doctor's wrists; but his motion pushes the two boats apart, and his other foot is still in Nguyen's boat, and the end result of all this is that the little speedboat suddenly and violently capsizes.

The thug goes in one direction and the Doctor, still clutching his phone, goes in the other. For a moment he's under the surface of the glassy, empty green, in the silence. Then Nguyen is shouting something across the water. The Doctor shakes the ocean out of his ears. 'They're walking into the sea! What is it? What's happening?'

So the crisis has come. He paddles over to her boat.

The dry thug throws something out over the water. Nguyen shouts, 'What are you doing, you idiot?' The net rains down on the Doctor, heavy ropes getting heavier as they soak. *This* is what they were going to use to catch the mermaid? 'She's still a mammal!' says the Doctor, as the weight of the thing drags him under.

The net proves more difficult to escape than he expected; the edges are weighted, pulling him deeper into the water even as he tries to push the wide rope mesh back over his head He can do without breathing for a while - he suspects the same is true of the mermaid - but not indefinitely.

He sees the mermaid's face through the squares of the net. She stares at him for a long moment, following him down, and then is gone with a swish of her body like an agile fish. Did he imagine that part? Did he imagine that she was there at all? He fumbles for his pocket knife, but the wet rope doesn't want to cut. The pressure is making his ears pop.

There's a sudden jerk, and then a rushing motion that makes his ears pop all over again. He's shooting up towards the surface like a rocket, trailing bubbles. At the prospect of breath, his lungs start to itch unbearably.

He hits the surface from below as though he's been thrown through a pane of glass. He falls back into the water, but the net keeps going up.

The X have got it. There are four, five, six of the 'flying saucers', each gripping an edge of the net with the jointed legs tucked underneath the armoured disc of their bodies. They seem to confer for a moment, then throw the heavy, dripping mass of rope down

into Nguyen's boat.

The mermaid surfaces next to the Doctor. Nguyen and the thugs are yelling, pointing up at the crabs and thrashing around a lot.

'It's okay,' says the mermaid:I know you're on our side'

Treading water, he turns to face her. 'Do you mean "our side" you and the X, or "our side" there are more people in the water?'

'They're coming now,' she tells him:Only the ones that are ready - the rest will come later, when it's time.There's plenty of space out here.They take good care of us' She squints up at the flock of X, who are hovering over Nguyen's boat, watching silently. The councillor starts up the motor and the inflatable boat skips urgently away over the waves, pursued by four of the crabs.They could catch the boat easily; they just want to make sure their enemy gets back to land, and stays there, out of their way.

'What's it all for? What do they want human beings for?'

She shrugs, water trickling over her shoulders. 'I don't think they want us for anything, really.They have to look after us, don't they? Since this is all their fault, after all'

'Pipe!' says the Doctor.An X has wafted up behind him and caught him by the back of the collar. Now it plucks him from the water, effortlessly: that's not crab strength, but something far more powerful. Psychokinesis? Some sort of exoskeleton? He wishes he could see it, but no matter which way he squirms, it's always at the back of his neck.

Ten feet below, the mermaid calls out, 'Don't worry. They'll take you safely back to shore'

'I don't want to go back to shore!' protests the Doctor, unbuttoning the top of his shirt before the X throttles him. 'I refuse to be pushed around by a collection of Machiavellian shellfish! I want to know why they set all this up. I want to know what they're going to do now that their hand has been tipped'

‘Nothing,’ she assures him:They’re not going to do anything’

The Doctor tries and fails to find a dignified position while dangling in mid-air. ‘I can’t believe that.’

‘It isn’t time yet,’ she calls out to him.

Then the ocean is blur underneath, Nguyen and her thugs and their boat a vanishing red-and-yellow speck behind.

Beneath him, rushing past, the ocean is an endless green plain, hiding who knows what secrets. He will never see the Southwell Park mermaid again.

The Destroyers
Steve Lyons

History wasn't meant to feel like this.

Delthea's first thought - the fear that cramped her stomach - was that she must have set the controls of the time ship wrong, for surely this was an older world rather than a younger one.

The air was still and stale, with an aching chill to it. It tasted of dust. Delthea had imagined it would be warmer and sweeter. The forest floor was a tangle of snares, its undergrowth having wound out of control until it choked itself. The time ship was already in the grip of wizened talons; they invaded its cracked ovoid shell and rooted it to the acidic soil.

Once upon a time, so all the stories said, this world was a paradise. Once upon a time, before the Destroyers arrived. Delthea clung to the hope - her lifelong belief - that the stories were true. She had not doubted it until now.

She would not doubt herself. She had been careful. She had read all the reports on the time ship, until she had been sure she could pilot it. She *had* reached her world's past - and, although this part of it did not match her dreams, she would find those dreams in time.

She fumbled with the straps of her backpack, unable to lay it down without the plants tearing at its fabric. She pulled out her copies of the ancient maps, and a compass.The time ship shouldn't have moved her in space. The city ought to be less than five miles away, to the southwest.

She wished she had brought a machete, but she hadn't expected this terrain. Still, the forest could only delay her, not stop her. Delthea had come too far- to be stopped.

She would find the Protector, the hero of her race.The machine that had become man.

The video image is old and scratchy, and it jerks between seconds.

...TARDIS was right: The woman has long, dark hair, and an eager curiosity in her brown eyes that contrasts with her alert stance. She is wrapped in animal skins ‘There was once... tribe on this world, after all:

‘Not past tense ... ‘ The man’s lips tighten and turn downward, his wide eyes bulging in fascination. He tilts his head back, raising a hand to steady a felt hat perched on his brown curls. ‘Look at... can’t have been entirely neglected I think we’ve found the source of our signal:We can’t see what he is looking at - but, as the man extends a hand toward a spot just below the camera, he gives a brief nod of understanding.

[Text missing] yet,’ says the woman, ‘the forest around this construct has not been...’

... see a door? I don’t see a door.’ The image has skipped, and now the man is standing a few steps back, his arms spread wide.

‘Perhaps it is as... said.They do not wish to receive visitors’

The man pouts, like a disappointed child. ‘I could take exception to...’ Now, his voice is raised to the sky: ‘Why wouldn’t they welcome a visit from me? Hmm?’

‘Perhaps there are creatures in the forest. Perhaps they built this city for their own...’

‘Nonsense! If there were something dangerous around here, we would have... tend to attract monsters.’ A long strip of multicoloured fabric encircles the man’s neck. One end of it coils onto the ground, and he gathers it up and tosses it carelessly over one shoulder.

... no door,’ says the woman, ‘then how do we...’

‘Don’t worry about...’ Something appears in the man’s hand: a silver

tube, a loop of metal enclosing a bullet-shaped head. And now he's grinning, exposing a set of immaculate white teeth. ...always know the best way to make an entrance'

When Delthea was young, her parents took her to the theatre. A pantomime

The story, she knew even then, was a traditional one. The Boggle-Eyed Demon came to the fairytale kingdom, drawn by the ideas of its people. He plotted to take those ideas from them - for he feared that, one day, they might learn too much. Enough to banish him.

He cut a ridiculous figure, the demon - clad in oversized clothing, with false teeth and eyes bouncing out of their sockets on springs. The audience was encouraged to deride him, and most of the children joined in with gusto, hissing and shouting at his every entrance. Delthea kept silent, shrinking against her dad's side. For months thereafter, her sleep was haunted by the image of the Dream Strangler: it was coiled like a noose around the demon's neck, stained with the colours of dead possibilities.

'These walls, they dream, will keep unwanted visitors at bay.'The actor had a good, deep voice, although he couldn't hope to replicate the rich, stentorian tones of the genuine demon. 'Yet, while a dream endures within, I'll always find a way.'

A charge went off in the head of the Boggle-Eyed Demon's prop gun. The actress playing his primitive servant cackled as a scenery flat fell with a thud. Delthea flinched, but didn't shriek as many of the other children did. Her mum told everyone, later, that the pantomime had scared her, but that wasn't true. Delthea wasn't scared. She was angry.

'What need have you of fresh ideas? Why plan for better days? Such dreams are not for mortal man - you ought to know your place. You aggravate this demon with your search for secret treasures. Like my companion, you should be content with simple pleasures.'

Oh, the pantomime had a happy ending, of course. The people of the kingdom defied the demon, and swapped ideas in secret.And

those ideas bred, and gained life of their own.

The Protector was another figure from folklore: the ultimate expression of the dreams of a world, and the one thing the Boggle-Eyed Demon feared. He was realised, as was customary, as a dashing champion in silver armour - and the audience cheered as he despatched his foe with a sword.All but Delthea.

The pantomime offered hope for the future, for the return of the Protector and his final victory. But all Delthea could think of was the past. She knew that the fiction was based on fact - she remembered all her grandfather had shown her, the faded pictures and the stuttering video clips - and it was all she could do to keep her resentment from boiling over.

The Protector, Granddad had been sure, was not coming back - for the people who could create him were too afraid to dream these days. The Destroyers had done their job well.

‘I want to thank my opponents for a good, clean campaign - and my backroom team, who have spent the past four months knocking on doors and handing out leaflets. Most of all, I want to thank everybody who voted for me. I know you’ve all heard great promises before, and I appreciate the trust you’ve placed in me. I won’t let you down.

‘Some people think the Destroyers are a myth, that the Boggle-Eyed Demon never existed. Some even whisper that the Protector himself is a lie. They’d deny the crowning achievement of our forefathers. It is up to those of us who do believe - those who have studied the evidence, and know that it cannot be refuted - to keep our dreams alive.

‘Many years ago, our world reached the peak of its development. Our ancestors created the Protector, to take the burdens of everyday life from their shoulders. He looked after them, catered to their every need.This is not myth. We have enough first-hand accounts of that time to know that it was a Golden Age.A Golden Age that we ought to have inherited.

‘But some beings - evil beings - saw what we had achieved, and they were envious. Our people couldn’t fight them. They didn’t know how; they had evolved beyond warfare.They trusted in their Protector to keep them safe, and this he did - but at the expense of his own life. Even the knowledge of how to rebuild him was taken - and throughout the generations since, we have suffered the effects of that heinous crime. We are still toiling to rebuild what was shattered, still held back by those who are fearful of reaching too high.

Now, at last, we can put things right. We can defy the Destroyers, and undo the damage they wrought - but only if we have the will. Our leaders say they won’t use the technology that has fallen into our hands.They still fear the Boggle-Eyed Demon. I say, with this technology - this time ship -the demon should fear *us!*

‘With your support, I will lobby the Ruling Council to send troops backwards in time. They will join the Protector in his final, fateful battle, and rewrite its outcome.

‘It is time to reclaim our heritage!’

She came upon it suddenly. The forest grew right up to its edge, camouflaging its grey metal expanse, and Delthea was keeping her head down, just concentrating on fighting her way forward. She didn’t know it was there until she almost walked into it - and then, when she looked up, she felt her heart would stop, with excitement at first and then with terror.

The city wall. One edge of the great dome that housed the Protector and his people.

A rusted mess of overlapping panels, hanging loose, great gaps yawning between them.

She had arrived too late, after all. The scientists must have been wrong. They thought they could date the Destroyers’ visit from the fragments of knowledge that survived it, and Delthea had trusted them. But the Destroyers had already been here, and done their worst.

The worst thing - the thing she couldn't bear - was that they had warned her about this: those backward leelas on the Ruling Council, refusing to listen, insisting that her plan was too risky.Too many obstacles. Too many variables. She wouldn't let them be right.

The wall throbbed beneath her hands, giving hope that all was not dead. One obstacle had been circumvented, at least. She hadn't known how she was going to get into the dome, famous for its lack of doors - but she had a theory that, far from being the percussive weapon that most people imagined, the Boggle-Eyed Demon's silver tube was a sonic device. She had fashioned something similar, to replicate the high-pitched whine that could be heard, briefly, in one of the video fragments. Had that failed, she would have trusted to the Protector to sense her presence, and her good intentions, somehow.

In the end, all she needed was her bare hands, and the muscles in her arms. Fearfully, Delthea began to prise the rusted panels apart.

* * *

...don't understand: says the woman thought the machine *wanted...'*
...gave me that impression.' The man pulls his face into a contemplative scowl. 'So, why would it send its robots to... ?'

They are inside now, a suggestion of a metallic wall behind them. They crouch in a narrow alcove, their limbs entwined.

The man's eyes come alight. He clicks his fingers, and cries out, 'Antibodies!'

The screen flares briefly, as his sudden movement draws a burst of fire. He flinches back into cover, but is undaunted.

Grinning brightly at the woman, he repeats in a stage whisper, Antibodies!' His face falls as she looks back at him with blank eyes.

'Come on, Leela, I've told you about...' He second-guesses himself, and frowns. 'Haven't I told you about antibodies? Microscopic...

well, most of them. The point is, we don't exercise conscious control over... job is to protect the body from invaders, and they do that job. They do it very efficiently; one might almost say single-mindedly, if they had... like drones. Or Daleks:

The woman's face is taut with concentration:The metal creatures only attacked us when we approached that control panel. Before that, they...'

The man nods. ...long as we don't pose a direct threat, they should leave us alone.'

'I think I understand.They can't reason.They can only follow orders. Is that... ? And those orders cannot be changed?'

'They're protecting the Protector,' says the man

The woman's eyes flash:Then we must destroy them:

Getting to the time ship had not been easy. It had taken months of work, *a* ruinous number of bribes in the right pockets and a great deal of luck. But at last, it was time.

Delthea keyed in the ignition sequence, feeling an electric tingle as the engine of the alien vessel shuddered into life beneath her.This was where her life began to make sense.All the sacrifices she'd made. the frustrations she had suffered, would be worthwhile.

She had tried to make good on her election manifesto. She had campaigned tirelessly for four long years, for her government to sanction the time ship's use. She had talked of sending others into the past - but, in private, she had dreamed of making that trip herself.

Now, because of the Ruling Council's intransigence, because Delthea was the only person who *could* do this, she was about to live her dream.

Briefly, she wondered what it would feel like to be a hero. No one would remember her promises, of course. With the shape of time

changed, there would have been no campaign, no election. Delthea might not even have been born. But her name would be recorded, she felt sure, in the Protector's databanks. She would be remembered as the saviour of her race, even if most of them didn't really appreciate what she'd saved them from.

The ship was old, and damaged. Some people claimed it was the Boggle-Eyed Demon who had cast it down to the surface of their planet, killing its pilot, incensed that another race had reached too high. The fools saw the time ship as a warning, when in fact it was an opportunity.

It would take Delthea where she needed to go; despite the scientists' cautions, she had never doubted that. Nor had she doubted that it would strand her there. It seemed right, somehow.

The coordinates were set. The engine had built to optimum power. Delthea could hear, over its whine, the ringing of booted footsteps on the concrete floor. She had no time to pause, to reflect, to bid a final goodbye to the world she knew.

She had no need of it. She had never found time for a husband, a family. She would not miss anything about her life here. By the time the guards arrived, she would be gone. She would have lived and died, and fulfilled her destiny. Everything would have changed.

The first thing that hit Delthea was the smell.

It was the putrid stench of decay, as if the city was rotting from the inside. She fought the reflex to gag. She had to snatch a handkerchief from her backpack, put it to her mouth - and even then, she couldn't go on until her body had had time to adjust.

It was dark inside the dome, and her eyes too had to acclimatise to the gloom. Just as they were doing so - just as she was beginning to make out the shapes of walls around her - a strip of lighting panels in the ceiling sputtered to life.

Cursing, Delthea blinked away flare patterns. She was in a grey corridor, only just wide enough to contain her broad shoulders. It

curved into the dark, in each direction.

She took her first hesitant steps along it, knowing that she had to see but dreading now that long-awaited moment. The lights followed her, illuminating a series of side passages that led deeper into the dome to be crisscrossed there by many more. And there were doors everywhere in the maze, so close together that their frames almost touched.

When she knew she could put it off no longer - when she had made random turns at four junctions, but found nothing new - Delthea chose one of those doors. She placed her hand on its cold metal surface, gathered her resolve and pushed.And the door cracked open.

She didn't know how long she stood after that, frozen, her mind unwilling to accept what her heart knew was true. Even as she regained her senses, her first act was to cross the corridor in a single step, and shoulder open another door.Then another and another, hoping against all reason that one of the doors would open onto something different.

They were like zombies: pale and emaciated, blotched black and purple, sitting in their ragged scraps of clothing in faded armchairs, one to each tiny room. Some were long dead, flesh sliding from their grey bones. Most were alive, but mindless, their eyes blank and white, drool seeping from their mouths - and each one was cradled by a nest of tubes, violating their bodies, pumping clear fluid into them, siphoning greens and browns off into the floor.

They wore headsets, silver and polished, the only things in the city that looked new.They bristled with dials and nodules.At last, Delthea plucked up the courage to take one, fumbling for it with her fingers, avoiding the accusing eye sockets of its dead owner.

She snapped the device around her head, feeling its needles extruding to penetrate her skull. As they touched her brain, she panicked. She reached up to remove the headset, thought she had tom it away and cast it to the ground, but realised she hadn't moved at all.

She was sinking.

No. Not sinking. She was soaring. Soaring through space, leaving the disappointment of dashed ambition behind her. And all around her, tiny stars were dancing in the firmament, and Delthea knew that every one of those stars was a possibility to be grasped. She could do anything, see anything, *be* anything. She only had to want it.

She was standing in a grand chamber. There was a domed ceiling high above her, decorated with exquisite paintings of scientific devices, and cold steam swirled about her feet. Obsidian walls were lined with throbbing circuitry, and lights that cascaded through elaborate patterns. And, in front of Delthea, a podium rose slowly through the white cloud - and, standing atop it like the statue of some great hero, was her knight in shining armour.

She had dreamt of this moment for so long. She had known exactly what she would say, had practised the conversation in her mind so many times.

‘You’re not real!’ she said.

‘Now do you understand?’

The room was lit by a small lamp, and by the glow of a monitor, both placed on a dark wood desk, neither able to dispel the deep corner shadows. Delthea’s chair was hard and angular, forcing her to sit straight-backed. Her heart still beat in her ears. Sweat soaked her palms, and she found it hard to concentrate on the flickering images on the screen in front of her.

She had been snatched off the street, bundled into a car, blindfolded with a balaclava turned the wrong way round. They wouldn’t harm her. She believed that. The Security Service were zealous with their secrets - some of the conspiracy theories may even have been true, although Delthea doubted it; they hadn’t been able to keep the time ship a secret - but they were basically good guys.

They hadn't introduced themselves. Her mind had raced, at first, thinking of the enemies she'd made: those people who believed, with all the fervour of superstitious fear, that her crusade would tempt a demon's retribution.

They wouldn't harm her. She clung to that. The black-suited men, with their opaque eyes. They were watching her, watching the monitor, assessing her reaction.

It took her a moment to process what she was seeing, to let it wash out her fear. Then, her fingers clenched with hatred. There was no mistaking the Boggle-Eyed Demon and his servant. The Destroyers. But these pictures, she had not seen before.

They were blurred and grainy, shot from above.The demon was looking up at the camera, his servant guarding his back. Behind them, there were lights, blinking and strobing across the only visible wall. Delthea gasped. Could this be...? It had to be.

They hadn't been able to keep the time ship a secret. But this...

'I just wish there were another... There *has* to be another way: The Boggle-Eyed Demon seemed anguished. His hands played with the ends of his Dream Strangler.

His companion was aggrieved. 'You insisted, in the corridor outside, that there was not.'

A hint of anger. 'Oh, I know what I said, Leela - but open your eyes.This isn't just another computer with ideas above its station.This isn't another Xoanon:

The Protector's inner chamber. These had to be the final moments. But why keep this from the people? Why deny them a glimpse of their god, more proof that their history was true?

'This is a beautiful, miraculous... a living being'

'You said it was a machine.'

‘Once, maybe - but now? It thinks, it feels, it *cares.* It’s alive, Leela. By any definition of the word, this “machine” is alive - and what right have we to extinguish that fragile, perfect life?’

The Boggle-Eyed Demon had compassion? He didn’t *want* to slay the Protector? It didn’t make sense. Delthea felt as if the world was shifting beneath her,like the whole of her life was being rewritten - and one more thing. She felt hope. Hope that fluttered in her chest. Hope that the Boggle-Eyed Demon’s argument would prevail, that the Protector would be spared. And that was the most illogical part of all - because these events had already been played out, and their tragic outcome was well known.

‘Doctor!’

The voice was resonant and powerful, and it chilled her spine. She couldn’t see where it had come from, but it pulled the Destroyers’ attention back up to the camera.

The demon said no more. Slowly, almost reluctantly, he stepped forward, until all that could be seen of him was a suggestion of colour at the bottom edge of the screen. Delthea’s breath sounded too loud in her ears, so she held it. Her thoughts were awhirl. She pondered on the meaning of that strange word - ‘Doctor’. But, far more importantly, she needed to know who had spoken it.

There was a theory that the Destroyers had been summoned to this world, that they had an ally - even a master - within the city. Or could it be that...?

Had she just heard the voice of...?

The demon stepped back into view, wearing a sombre expression. His servant gave him a questioning look, which he shrugged off.Turning back to the camera, he said in a subdued tone, ‘You’re right. I don’t want you to be right, I always like to believe in another possibility, a better way, but...’ He sighed, and bowed his head. ‘You’re very wise’

‘We are to complete our mission?’ asked the savage, tentatively.

The demon nodded, without turning to her. His eyes were closed, his teeth gritted, and there was an edge of pain to his voice. ‘Yes.Yes, we have to do what we came here for.’

The screen went blank then, leaving Delthea gaping at her own pale-faced reflection.

She didn’t move, didn’t speak, didn’t know what to think, until one of the black-suited men leaned deliberately into her field of vision, his intrusive presence demanding her attention.

Now do you understand?’

She didn’t know what to do. She didn’t know where to go.

She couldn’t stay in the city, that was for sure. The sight of its wasted inhabitants repulsed her. She found herself retracing her steps to the time ship, although it was useless now.The thin branches of the forest whipped at her face again, but she hardly felt them.

Her world’s Golden Age - an illusion. A cruel lie. Her ancestors hadn’t improved their lives, they had simply found an escape from them. They had shut out the world to take refuge in fantasy - abetted by their creation, who had soaked up nutrients from the soil to pump into their abandoned bodies.

Wounded and hopeless, Delthea had been tempted to join their dreams. She would have been protected, after all. Until the Destroyers came.

It had taken all the strength she had to tear off the headset. But, as she had done so, she had felt the Protector’s approval. *He* had been real, of that she was certain. Not his physical form, of course - she had been right about that - but his presence. He had contacted her through the dream, and his words lingered in her memory now as the rest of the dream dissipated.

He had sensed her mind entering his matrix, read her life story therein. He had been drawn to her, wanting to ask her about the future. Wanting to tell somebody what he had decided.

She had *helped* him to decide. She was still numb about that, like it was too big to feel.

‘You brought them here; she had whispered. ‘They_ they tried to tell me, but I didn’t... I couldn’t accept it. I thought it was a hoax, a lie... Even if it were true, I thought there must have been a mistake.A malfunction, or... or... I thought, if I could only reach this time, if I could talk to the scientists, warn them... I thought everything would be all right:

Delthea had imagined how the Protector would sound, based on that single word she had heard him speak many months ago. In her head, he had been confident and commanding. It was a shock, then, to hear his anguish, to realise that he was wracked with indecision.

‘I am programmed to maintain the city,’ the Protector had said.

‘Yes; said Delthea.

‘I am programmed to ensure the welfare of my creators:

‘You’re the Protector,’ she had responded helplessly.

‘I have come to believe; he had said, ‘that those directives are incompatible:

A rustle in the undergrowth.

Delthea froze. She had not seen any animals on her way here - but who knew what untamed monstrosities lurked in the vegetation?

Footsteps. Crashing towards her.And was that a voice she could hear? Her heart leapt into her throat. Not animals. Something worse.

How could they have come here already? The signal had only just

been sent.

‘Tell me about the future,’ the Protector had said. So, Delthea had told him. And, when she was done, he had asked her just one question. A question that, for what seemed like a long time, she hadn’t been able to answer. It had felt like betraying her people, somehow. Betraying herself, and everything she had believed in. She knew the truth now - but admitting it out loud, admitting it *to him,* was the hardest thing she had had to do.

He was the Protector. She couldn’t deny him. She couldn’t lie to him. ‘Your future; the Protector had said. ‘Is it better than this?’

And, at last, Delthea had hung her head and closed her eyes, and whispered, ‘Yes:

The sounds were drawing nearer. Delthea’s every instinct told her to run, but somehow she couldn’t communicate that command to her legs.

And then, they were in front of her. Close enough for her to touch.The demon, his round eyes gaping as he came to an abrupt halt. The savage, dropping easily into an alert crouch.

The most vilified creatures in her people’s history. Their folk demons, whose effigies burnt on carnival nights. The beings whom Delthea had wasted her life hating and fearing - and even now, with all she knew, she felt like screaming at the sight of them.

‘Hello,’ offered the Boggle-Eyed Demon, tentatively. Gleaming teeth split his face, and he snatched his hat from his head and thrust something under Delthea’s nose. She started, expecting a weapon of some kind. But it was just a bag.A crumpled paper bag.

‘Would you like a jelly baby?’ asked the demon. He was smaller than she’d imagined him ‘No? Well... perhaps you can help us anyway. We’re trying to find the city. You do come from the city, I expect?’ With a supreme effort of will, Delthea was able to shake her head.

‘No, no,’ said the demon, his eyes narrowing in thought,’I don’t suppose you do.Then you’re a visitor, like us - and H don’t suppose the city is very welcoming to visitors at the moment, is it? Of course not - only we’ve been invited, you see, so it would be rather rude of us not to show up. Don’t you think it would be rude? I think it would be rude.’

Delthea just gaped at him. ‘Well: said the demon, undeterred by her silence, rolling his hat back up to his head, ‘it’s been nice talking to you, and if you could just point us in the right direction before you leave, that would be very kind of you’

She found herself raising her arm, extending her index finger. And the Boggle-Eyed Demon smiled at her, and thanked her. He *thanked* her.

She stared after them for a long time after they had left, swallowed up by the forest again.The Destroyers. She didn’t know what she would have done, had the Protector made the request of her that he had made of them. Perhaps that was why he hadn’t asked her.

And she wondered what she would do now - now that they were here, now that this was real.

The Protector wanted his creators to think for themselves again. He feared that it was already too late. He would be gone, soon - but Delthea would still be here, trapped in this time.

She had only ever wanted to help her people reclaim their lives. Maybe she still could.

Flames lick around the edge of the picture. Smoke almost obscures the figures of the man and the woman, lending them a shadowy, sinister air.

The man has removed his hat, and holds it clasped to his chest as if in reverence. ‘All he wanted was to protect... he did the best he could for them. It’s what he was programmed to do, and he... that programming, until the end’ is why he had to be destroyed,’ the woman reminds him. ‘I know,’ says the man, nodding to himself. ‘I

know’

The picture folds in upon itself, and melts into a dark smudge. The excerpt ends.

The Reproductive Cycle
Matthew Griffiths

How could you get claustrophobic inside the TARDIS? wondered Peri. She'd been walking for hours now, and the further she went, the more she felt that the space was closing in around her. Not physically, but somewhere further along the corridor, where the roundels tapered dimly into the distance, and just around the edges of her vision. It was making her dizzy. She stopped for a moment, leaning against the wall.

She shouldn't have skipped breakfast. She was convinced the Doctor had lost the kitchen, though, and she had just discovered the food machine was out of order, so she hadn't really had much choice. She rubbed her forehead. What was *with* the TARDIS anyhow? Nothing seemed to be working any more.The Doctor had spent weeks taking the console apart and shouting at it, but he hadn't got any nearer to the problem. She suspected he'd made it worse. These weeks had been the longest she'd ever spent in the craft, and it was starting to feel like home, in an awkward sort of way

She remembered her college room-mate, Janine, telling her about a summer she had spent in aWinnebago, driving round New England. It had rained constantly, and she and her boyfriend had had to stay the whole time in the vehicle. 'They'd split up when they got back to New York. Winnebagos weren't designed for living in, said Janine, they were just a way of taking your troubles around with you.

Her feet ached. She took off her high heels. Definitely not the shoes to storm out in, she reflected. She lifted her foot, taking the sole between her hands, and tried to rub the pain out. She winced, and hoped the Doctor hadn't lost his shoe cupboard as well.The lighting dropped, flickered for a moment, then settled for being half as bright as it had been. Peri looked at the ceiling. Just one more minute, she thought, then I'm on my way.

She pushed herself back onto her feet, her shoes in one hand, the

other toying with her St Christopher's. A machine that travelled through time , and space, she thought, and this was as fast as she could move, hobbling barefoot along the corridor. Ouch.

A door came into view on her left. Peri stopped, looked at it for a moment, then pushed it open.A light stuttered on as she went in. 'Great: she muttered. I've found the TARDIS icebox:

The room was full of wooden crates.Two or three of them looked like they'd been jemmied open and were spilling circuitry and electronic components across the floor, and a roundel was hanging ajar, the interior glowing a dim green against her face. One of the boxes had the words 'energy cells' stencilled across it, but, turning it into the light, Peri could see that it was empty. All outta juice,' she sighed. 'You and me both: And the Doctor still had the nerve to tell *her* to keep the place tidy. She slung her shoes inside, then pulled the door shut behind her.

She padded on up the corridor, her arms folded. She remembered how Mom and Howard had dumped boxes of their belongings in the attic when they got married, promising to sort things out, then never getting round to it. That was just an attic: imagine you had a house the size of a capital city. Or bigger. She looked up along the white walls that narrowed into a vanishing point, and let herself imagine long, cool colonnades in Mediterranean cities.The TARDIS wasn't the Winnebago; it was the whole summer vacation gone wrong.

Peri looked again: there didn't seem to be any more doors for as far as she could see. She glanced back down the corridor. It stretched out as far behind her as it did ahead, the wall an unbroken pattern of circles. Even the cupboard had disappeared. Perhaps the TARDIS was conserving energy by keeping the lights down, removing all the doors. Peri shivered - she really might be stuck in here forever. If only this *had* been a real city, then she could have stopped and asked someone directions. Sure, they may not have been able to speak English, but they could at least have pointed.

Gradually, she registered the muted humming of the TARDIS again. That was the one thing she'd been taking for granted, and now it

was almost creeping up on her. It was eerie. Was there something else in it? Some other sound?

‘He-hello?’ Peri tried. She knew there was no one there, but had to say something. There had to be another sound, a noise other than the TARDIS’s own.

‘Hello?’ But her voice was still a tentative croak.

This was ridiculous. She spent most of the time *outside* the TARDIS being in danger. If she was stuck *in* here, the last thing she wanted was to feel under threat. She breathed in. And then again. She began to feel calmer.

Right: now she was going to head back to the console room. She was going to tell the Doctor that she’d thought it through, what they’d shouted - said to each other. She’d have to carry on walking and hope the TARDIS knew where she wanted to get to. Its crazy geography was like that sometimes, but that was as sinister as it was going to be, she decided. So it was... this way. Peri rubbed her forehead. Honestly. She ought to have gotten Turlough to show her around properly. And then Peri heard a noise.A human noise.

* * *

The Doctor kicked some components out of his way, clearing a space on the floor for the objects. With a sigh, he flicked his coat-tails aside and squatted down to inspect his collection: a baseball cap, embroidered with the letters ‘NYSU’; a champagne cork from his nine-hundredth birthday; an entry visa for Heaven; some pressed flowers in an envelope; a postcard from Seville. Keepsakes of a travelling life, the Doctor pondered. Travels, he reminded himself, that would be no more if he couldn’t get the TARDIS completely operational again. He tossed the objects into the upturned cap, got to his feet, then tipped them back into the locker he’d taken them from. He held on to the cap, turning it round in his hands.

If the components he needed weren’t in there, then where were they? ‘You’re going to have to have a good spring clean around here

one spring soon, Doctor,' he murmured, raising his eyebrows. He toyed with the idea that, perhaps, if he'd been a little more circumspect about the repairs, the TARDIS would not now be confined to the vortex.Although *perhaps,* had Peri helped him out as she had said she would, they'd be on their way by now. Why *did* the woman have to take so unkindly to assisting him? Wasn't that what assistants were for?

The Doctor scratched his forehead, flopping the baseball cap onto his blond curls. Hadn't she been trying to tell him something? It had been difficult to hear with his head under the console. Perhaps he should have gone after her, talked to her. Communicating with humans was such an effort sometimes, he reflected.

He looked at the exposed panel of the console again: it was getting the telepathic circuits communicating with the isomorphic regulators that was the problem here. If he couldn't, then the old girl would slowly take root in the vortex and settle down for good. The Doctor glanced back at the wall locker. If the TARDHS becaine his - their permanent home, those keepsakes would end up being no more than fossils. Why were they gathered together like that anyway? Was Peri squirrelling things away so she could take them with her when she left? Now that wouldn't make any sense. Some of those nick-nacks were his. He brushed back a long lapel, fishing out his fob watch. She'd been gone for several hours now. Where *was* she?

The Doctor took off the cap, stuffing it into a pocket. He tried a few more roundels: a control unit; the coordinate subroutines; a mirror. He ran a hand through his hair to neaten it, then slapped the roundel shut. He'd

[Text missing]

twisting out of the edge of one of the roundels. That definitely was *not* how he'd left it. He lifted the circular panel out and looked at the circuit. Everything seemed to be at home, but someone had been fiddling around inside. As though they'd been trying to access the TARDIS's central nervous system.The Doctor frowned. He was sure *he* hadn't done this.

He stood there, tapping an impatient foot on the floor. Where *had* Peri got to?

The room was there when Peri looked round, or at least the door was. She peered inside. ‘Hello?’

It was a little lighter in here, and the floor was soft underfoot. Carpet -hey, that was a novelty for the TARDIS. As she got used to the light, Peri took in the decor.

The opposite wall sloped downwards, like in an attic room, and was painted a warm yellow. A couple of posters were tacked up there, showing Big Bird and Bert and Ernie, and there was a mobile hanging from the ceiling, tinkling as it turned. Sweet.

Light was coming from the far right of the room, from a window behind a pair of curtains Peri crossed to it, enjoying the warmth of the carpet underfoot and the orange glow from the sky outside.A brightly patterned rug lay across the floor, and there was a chair with blankets neatly folded onto it. It felt much more natural than the rest of the TARDIS. Much more like home. Peri smiled; no place like it. The TARDIS was helping her out, she figured, trying to make her feel more comfortable. I guess if we’re stuck here, we might as well feel we belong here. She frowned. In a nursery?

The hum of the TARDIS become audible again. Peri shivered. She looked down and saw a dark, boxy object below the window.

Then she screamed.

The Doctor cocked his head. ‘Peri!’

He bolted down the corridor towards the sound of her scream, and kept on running. Where was she?

Turning a corner, he could hear another sound, quiet, like sobbing. He squinted into the dull light. There was an edge of brightness against the roundelled hallway. A door? He knew the TARDIS like the back of his hippocampus, and he was sure he hadn’t seen it

before. He slowed, approaching the new light warily.

‘Peri?’

The sound was coming from inside this room, whatever it was, and he pushed the door open, blinking in the overlit surroundings. The walls in here hinted at roundels, an elementary rococo design picked out in gold on off-white panelling. Along the middle ran a frieze showing simplified vignettes of the galaxy’s history, and below it, a very basic computer, with a tray of blocky, perspex switches on the floor.

‘Good grief,’ he breathed. He looked to his right. Peri stood there, in front of a large blue monitor screen, flickering with readings. Beneath it was - a cot? The sobbing had changed to cooing.

‘Peri?’

She turned to him, carefully, holding a bundle of blankets. She was dandling them in her arms.At one end, he could see a cherubic pink face and a whorl of wispy, golden hair.

The Doctor boggled. ‘A baby?’ ‘Isn’t she beautiful?’ Peri breathed.

Peri watched the Doctor approach. The orange light washed the colour from his coat, his face.

Where did it come from?’ he asked, eventually.

‘Doctor...’ Her tone was light, but gently scolding. The Doctor caught her eye, then looked away, not quite awkwardly.The baby chortled.

I know very well where babies *come* from; the Doctor blustered. I meant, where did *this* one come from?’

I found *her* in here. Doctor, I didn’t know you had a nursery on board!’ The Doctor narrowed his eyes. He tried to speak, then stopped, then started again.

Well; he muttered, ‘nor did I: He paced round them, miming his hands over the walls, the window, the curtains.

Peri swept a stray brown curl from the baby’s forehead, looking into her hazel-green eyes. Such a pretty kid. ‘The nasty old Doctor’s been kidnapping children: she gurgled, ‘and he didn’t even know it!’ The child gurgled back at her.

‘Kidnap? Kidnap?!’ the Doctor protested. ‘My dear Peri, this is far more than just a nursery, and I most certainly have not been kidnapping children,’ He snorted. ‘Do I look like the Pied Piper?’

Peri rocked the child casually in her arms. She felt so relaxed. The Doctor’s words drifted across her. ‘What?’ asked whether you thought I resembled that gentleman from Hamelin:

No. About the nursery:

The Doctor held up a finger.’This; he proclaimed, is not a nursery.Well, not in any way that you would understand it.What it *is* is an exact replica of the very kindergarten I went to when I was a Time Tot!’

‘You’re kidding! You got *Sesame Street* too?’

The child was chortling now.

The Doctor frowned. ‘What makes you think this is a nursery?’

‘Don’t - don’t be silly, Doctor. What does it look like?’

The Doctor stared at the child in her arms. Ah-hah What indeed...’ He started pacing the room again, chewing his lip, then stood right in front of her. His eyes were closed and his nostrils twitched.The baby’s chortling faltered.

‘Doctor? What are you doing?’ The baby started to cry. ‘What is it, honey?’ She continued to rock the child, who frowned back up at her.

The Doctor's right eye snapped open. 'Hmm? Oh, please don't be so obtuse, Peri. Can't you see what's going on here?'

Peri balked. 'Doctor, I am *not* being obtuse. This place is just like my room back home, back when -'The baby sniffed and took a deep breath, preparing to wail. Peri looked at her. 'Back when my dad was alive.' The baby began crying in earnest.

'Is it?' asked the Doctor. 'Is it really?' He took a step towards her. 'May I?' He eased the baby from her arms, and draped its blanket over his patchwork sleeve. He cooed at the child distractedly. Peri wiped a tear from the edge of her nose, then watched the Doctor. He had his back turned, hiding the baby from her.

'Doc-Doctor?' she sniffed.

The Doctor rummaged in his pockets, producing a spotty handkerchief, which he threw to her. Here: She dabbed away the tears. 'Why does this room look like your home, do you think?'

Peri took a breath:She's trying to make us feel at home here, is that it? Getting used to living in the TARDIS?' The Doctor looked at her over his shoulder, but said nothing.The baby was quiet now. 'I was so lost out here,' Peri continued, her voice faltering, 'and she felt that.'

'Yes, he did.

'But why?' Peri frowned.

Ah!'The Doctor's crystal blue eyes lit up. 'Who do you know who had that ability?' he smiled. 'To change his appearance according to the influence of those around him? Think about it. Concentrate.' He turned back to the baby, rocking it in his arms, out of her sight.

Peri rubbed her forehead, fell into the chair. don't understand.' She leant forwards, massaging her toes. What was the Doctor getting at? She placed her foot back on the cool white floor.

She looked up with a start.The room was like any other in the

TARDIS, oddments of furniture dotted around the place, its walls covered with circular panelling. The Doctor turned round.

He was holding a heavy bundle of blankets, containing what looked like a metal doll. Its glassy eyes twinkled back at her. The Doctor gave her a significant look. ‘Someone who could fit in with his psychic *environs?’*

‘Kamelion; said Peri.

* * *

It lay there until long after they had left it, listening to the hum of the nursery. It had listened to that gentle song for so long as it slowly, unknowingly grew, it felt like a lullaby.

But then, she had come and woken it. Given it new thoughts, new energy. And so had he! They were putting so much thought into it, it didn’t know who it was. Did that matter? Its metal fontanelle twitched. Now they were gone, beyond its thinking. But it was still alive. Alive without them! It wanted to feed. It wanted to grow.

It climbed from the cot and dropped onto the floor. Crawling stiffly across the room, it eased the door open with its precise, tiny fingers, and made its way slowly along the corridor.

The Doctor breezed into the kitchen, swinging the door shut behind him. Cobwebs wafted upwards into the dark, round ceiling.

‘You know,’ he called to Peri, who was slumped over the other side of the circular, central counter, ‘I’m glad I’ve had some time in the TARDIS for a change.”Quality time”, I suppose you would call it’ He stood next to her, wiping a finger along a surface. ‘Oh, don’t you get up. I’ve put him down’ He rubbed the dust from his fingertips. ‘So, what’s for supper?’

‘I haven’t started anything yet’

‘Haven’t started? Haven’t - ?’

‘Keep your voice down, Doctor!’

‘Yes. Sorry.’ He put his hands in his pockets and rocked slowly backwards and forwards. ‘Only, I *am* a bit peckish.

Children take a lot of effort, you know.’

‘Tell me about it,’ Peri groaned. She rubbed her eyes with the heel of her hand. ‘How does a kid grow that much in a few days?

I mean, what are we going to do with her?’

The Doctor had strolled round the far side of the counter, and was kneeling to look in the fridge.The interior cast a greenish light on his face, making the room twice as bright. He closed the door with a grimace, and moved on to one of the cupboards above the work surface.

‘Spaghetti hoops, powdered milk, bread... Hmm I’ll have to give it some thought. Have we got any eggs?’

‘Don’t ask me. Come on, Doctor, that kid is a serious commitment; we can’t just treat it like another bit of the TARDIS that needs repairing!’

The Doctor peered over the counter at her. ‘I am *taking* this very seriously, Peri! He’s growing up, becoming more powerful. Too powerful for us to resist, at least at a conscious level. Now, Kamelion could filter out certain influences, but our youngster is having something of an identity crisis. Can you conceive what it might be like to be the child of two brains at once?’ He sighed, and opened his hands in an explanatory gesture. ‘Think how malleable you were as a child, Peri - and double it. The child is being shaped by both of us, and has so much youthful - vigour, it’s trying to live up to both of our images. The result? Confusion. Imprecision.’ He stared over her shoulder, his voice taking on an abstract tone. ‘It isn’t terribly easy being more than one person.’

‘Yeah, yeah, yeah’ Peri pushed herself upright. ‘So what *are* we going to do?’ ‘Spaghetti on toast, I would have thought. Have you

seen the state of the larder?' 'Huh? I thought you did the shopping.'

'Me? When have I had any time?'

'Some people make the time'

'And what's that supposed to mean?'

'Well *if* you'd made the time to keep an eye on things in the TARDIS, you *might* have noticed that Kamelion was getting broody!'

The door creaked open.

'Mommy?'

Peri sighed. 'Now see what you've done: she muttered as she crossed to the door. 'What's the matter, honey?'

The Doctor watched Peri lift the toddler into her arms, the little boy's blond curls bobbing up and down. The child flung its arms around her, dropping his teddy bear. The Doctor sped round to pick it up, handing it back to the child. He smiled at the boy wistfully.

'Honey?' Peri asked once more.

'I couldn't sleep. I'm frightened:

'Don't be silly. There's nothing to be frightened of in here'

'I was scared of the monsters.'

Peri glowered at the Doctor. He avoided her look.

'Daddy's been telling you bedtime stories again, huh?' She cuddled the boy's head into her shoulder. 'What did I say to you about telling Junior your fairy tales? They give her nightmares:

'It was only the one about the Gastropods.' The Doctor sounded sheepish. 'And besides, you'd do well to remember that she - he - that "Junior" relies on our psychic input, so a scary story won't

hurt, once in a while.' A smile pinched the corner of his mouth. 'Children do so enjoy monsters:

'Well if it keeps her up all night, *I* won't have much fun,' Peri grumbled. 'I'm gonna take her back to bed' She murmured soothingly to the child, squeezing round the door and back to the nursery. The Doctor watched them go. He sighed.

I wonder when she stopped enjoying'

Peri ushered the kid into bed, tucking her in. She brushed the girl's long brown hair gently over the pillow.The room had grown with the kid, Peri thought as she looked round - its own small bed in place of the cot, some new posters, a hope chest. It felt like home, but a little schmaltzy in places.

'Mommy?'

'Yes, honey?' Peri looked back into the pretty, heart-shaped face. Away from the Doctor, she realised how much the kid was becoming like her, her own sweet insistence at that age.

'Can you leave the light on, Mommy?'

'Sure. Sure I will: Peri kissed the girl's warm forehead. 'Goodnight, sweetheart: She stood and padded back across the room.

'You won't ever leave me, in the dark, will you?' She smiled a tired smile. 'Of course not:

'You'll stay with me always.'

'Mmm-hmm Goodnight.'

'Goodnight, Mommy:

The more it grew, the more they slept. Did they assume it was more independent now, it didn't need them so much? Or were they simply exhausted? But the more they slept, the further away their thoughts were, and the more it needed to know what to be. It

would keep growing, of course, as far as it was programmed to. But who would it be then?

It was still so hungry. It walked unsteadily into the control room, pushing the door closed behind it, then crossed to the console in the half-light. It lifted one of the panels, its face reflecting the green glow from within as it inspected the components. Its fingers bristled with anticipation. It swung its right arm upright, holding the panel open, and locked it into place.Then, it released a servo with a satisfying hiss, clicking the arm apart at the elbow.With its left hand, it began to rummage among the exposed circuitry; it pulled a few circuit boards free and began clipping them inside its elbow. It was growing.

Reconnecting elbow to forearm, it let go of the panel and held its arms out in front of it. Now for the other elbow. When it had repeated the process, it lowered the panels back onto the console and tapped them into place.Then, it squatted down beside the central column.

It found a clump of wires that were hanging free, and pulled one from among the others, attaching it into its wrist. How good it felt to feed again, to feed and not worry about who it was. It rose stiffly. The sound of the console room dropped in pitch, and the android started to hum to itself.

Abruptly, the interior door was open, and the lights came up. ‘Got you!’ cried the Doctor.

He stood for a moment in the doorway. ‘At last; he hissed. He found himself looking at a pudgy, juvenile face, wearing an awkward expression.

A more calculated one, the Doctor pondered. The child’s hair looked slightly tousled, as though he’d just got out of bed. ‘I was feeling... peckish, the boy mumbled.

‘So you came for a midnight snack, I suppose?’The Doctor tugged off his nightcap, pushing it into the pocket of his dressing gown. He watched the child try to disconnect himself from the console as

surreptitiously as possible. ‘Don’t think I don’t know what you’ve been up to!’ he continued. He marched round the console, his slippers slapping against the floor, and grabbed the boy’s wrist.

‘Daddy, stop it!’ the child wailed.The Doctor winced; its plummy tones were rather too familiar.

‘You won’t get around me that easily, young man,’ he stated, but his voice was a little softer. ‘You’ve been siphoning off artron energy, haven’t you?’

The boy’s head slumped, his spotty pyjamas quivering. The Doctor raised an eyebrow, regarding this sorry specimen. ‘You think I didn’t suspect? The power losses, the rewiring, the telepathic circuits?’

The boy looked up at him tearfully.The Doctor sighed. He looked like a child who’d taken one too many sticky buns from the tuck shop.

‘You do realise that’s why we’ve been going nowhere? You’re quite a selfish little boy, really.’ He stared down into the child’s clear blue eyes. His own clear blue eyes.This was absurd. The creature - the *boy* was merely trying to grow, to feed, and be as amenable about it as possible. All right, maybe not selfish, exactly,’ the Doctor continued, ‘but somewhat thoughtless. Mmm?’

‘It’s not my fault, Daddy!’

‘Oh, don’t be such a spoilt child!’ snapped the Doctor. ‘You’re beginning to sound like your mother.’ He narrowed his eyes. The boy began sobbing. ‘But no,’ muttered the Doctor, ‘it probably *isn’t* your fault, is it? It’s what you’ve been programmed for: He put a careful arm around the boy’s chubby shoulders:There, there!The child wiped its eyes, sniffing ostentatiously. The Doctor pulled out his handkerchief, and the child dabbed his face:Better, now?’The boy nodded. Well, then. I want you back in your room.And you’ll stay in there until I say otherwise. Do I make myself absolutely clear?’ Another nod, a little more earnest than before, the Doctor noted. ‘I don’t want you playing around with the electricity again’

He ruffled the boy's hair, then the young man scuttled off, his pyjama trousers flapping.The Doctor waited till he had gone, then turned to the console.

He stared at a clump of wires. 'What has he *done* to you, old thing?'

Peri sat at her dresser, toying with her St Christopher's. She squinted at her dim reflection. The kid had certainly had some growth spurts. Six more years in the last two days! Pretty soon she'll be as old as me, she thought. She was already becoming quite an - independent young lady.

Peri sighed. How could she let the Doctor know what was on her mind?

There was a gentle knock-knock at the door.

'Come - come in,' Peri called.

The Doctor opened the door carefully. 'Hello: He wasn't wearing his coat, which suggested he was gearing up for a serious chat. May I sit down?'

'Sure.'

He looked round, spotting a bedside chair under a heap of clothes. Fastidiously, he lifted these and placed them on the end of the bed, patting them down. So, he's feeling awkward too.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Well, it's about, it's about "Junior",' replied the Doctor. 'You've noticed how quickly he's growing?'

'And have you seen what she's wearing?' Peri frowned. 'I wouldn't let any daughter of mine out in those clothes.' She pulled a thread from the hem of her leotard.

The Doctor glared at her. 'Well, we know where he gets *that* from' Peri bristled 'You're a fine one to talk,"Pop":

‘But that’s it, Peri! “Junior” *does* take after his father. He’ll keep growing until he’s like him. Not me - his *real* father.’

‘Kamelion:

‘So who, do you think, is his mother? His real mother?’

The lighting flickered. Peri looked round.Then the floor tilted, tipping the clothes from her bed.The Doctor caught the mirror, and Peri steadied herself.

‘The TARDIS isn’t just a... a gallimaufry of gadgets, Peri - it’s alive. It’s letting him take what he needs, nurturing him.

Turning itself into his home.’ He gave a facial shrug. ‘She’s even been putting some mementos aside for him’

Peri shivered ‘So what do we do?’ she asked.The Doctor set the mirror back on the dresser. His expression was stiff, serious. Peri faltered. ‘You can’t mean -’

‘Peri, he’s dangerous. He and his kind were designed as weapons’ ‘But you can’t kill her. She’s just a kid!’ The Doctor boggled. ‘Kill her? My dear woman, I’d never so much as countenanced the thought’

Peri narrowed her eyes.

‘Yes, well,’ the Doctor continued quietly, ‘I was a different man in those days.And besides, those were different circumstances’

Peri looked to one side. ‘So what do we do?’

The Doctor leaned towards her. ‘We shall be humane about it, so to speak. We talk to him’

* * *

They were on their way. It could feel their minds against its further

senses, getting closer, more powerful. They had trapped it here with their ideas, it decided. Especially him. Now they were coming for it. It shivered. What did they want?

Peri stood next to the Doctor, in the corridor outside Junior's room'.There was hardly any light now, but the Doctor's eyes seemed to sparkle in the darkness. He rocked backwards and forwards, his soles squeaking off the floor. Peri gritted her teeth. Why did he have to make this so annoying?

'Can't we just get on with it?'

The Doctor sighed. 'Very well' He tapped his knuckles smartly against the door.

'What do you want?' The voice was uneven in pitch, as though it was beginning to break. Peri and the Doctor continued to stand in the corridor.

'Ladies first,' the Doctor said, at length. Peri snorted and went into the room.

It felt almost as gloomy inside; the place was a pigpen, clothes and magazines everywhere.A duvet sprawled across a larger bed, and sneakers and underwear were strewn over the carpet. Bert and Ernie, meanwhile, had been replaced by Madonna and other pop stars.

'Well?' scowled the dark-haired, pony-tailed girl. Her brightly painted lips rolled apart as she appeared to chew gum. She was wearing a skimpy top and a pair of lurid hot pants, and stood there, hands on hips, as though daring them to start a confrontation. Peri folded her arms awkwardly across herself. Had she ever been like that? *Really?*

The Doctor looked pretty taken aback - what was he seeing? Peri wondered.What was the Time Lord equivalent of a stroppy teenager in his bedroom?

The Doctor looked down the benches that were littered with burnt

or broken components. Something noxious was brewing in a retort, and a model spacecraft built and dismantled itself as its timeline was tinkered with. Two monitors showed the most atrocious temporal algorithms he'd seen since... well, he'd rather *not* remember. And a bullish young man stood there, wearing a Shobogan robe, his hands on his hips.

'Young man, this is a disgrace!' The Doctor practically bellowed. 'When H said you had to stay in your room I didn't expect you to take it to pieces as well!'

'You can talk,' the youngster snarled. 'Look at the state you've left the TARDIS in!'

The Doctor bridled.'That is necessary repair work. Repair work, I might add, necessitated by your ransacking of the TARDIS console'

'I'm growing up! I have to eat too, you know: He scowled. And you're no good in that kitchen:

'We're concerned about you,' Peri offered. 'We want to help you get through this too.Adolescence is, is a difficult enough time as it is -' 'Then give me a break!'

The Doctor recoiled.Why was the young man becoming so colloquial? The child continued. need some room to myself.You can't keep me shut up in here.' He adopted a plaintive expression. 'You want me to starve!'

'How dare - how *dare* you think I'd want to do that to my own - to a sentient life form!' the Doctor shouted. 'Just butt out of this, will ya?' Peri snapped.

'Why don't you just say it? You never wanted me in the first place.' 'But honey, we love you as much as -'

'Oh, just stay out of my life! You don't even love each other any more!' The Doctor looked from the boy to Peri, aghast. She looked back at him. 'You're not my real parents, anyway,' the kid grumbled, slamming the door as he left. 'I'm getting outta here.'

The Doctor continued to stare at her.

‘So that’s it, is it?’ His tone was icy:That thing - that *child* may be very confused, very angry, but ultimately, it is shaped by our thoughts.’

Peri looked at the floor.

‘I had assumed it needed the attention of both of us, but it was you, wasn’t it?’ He stepped back, levelling his finger at her.’It was you to whom it first responded, wasn’t it?’ he sneered. ‘You who woke it.You who are influencing it right now.’

‘Doctor, you -’

‘Well, Peri? After all you and I have been through together?’The Doctor put his hands on his hips.

‘But that thing -’

‘Peri, it’s not a thing, it’s a sentient being. In your terms, even a person. And *it* wants to leave, because it knows *you* want to.’

She watched the Doctor wipe his hands. Then he shoved the handkerchief back into his pocket and rolled his shirtsleeves down. The lighting flickered for a second, and she shivered.The Doctor looked up.As if in response, the lights settled on a careful brightness, the hum of the TARDIS at an even pitch. He looked across the console at her.

‘You’re absolutely sure this is your decision?’ he asked. There was a pause. ‘Peri?’ ‘Yes; she said flatly.

The Doctor breathed out. ‘Very well.’ He tapped a few keys, which chirruped back at him. ‘Never let it be said that I couldn’t fulfil a straightforward request: She said nothing. ‘Certainly not now the TARDIS is restored to its full vigour and operational capacity,’ the Doctor continued.

‘This was the best way,’ she said. ‘There’s only so much space you can call home’ She looked round the console room.

‘Sometimes it gets so big it makes you claustrophobic’

The noise of materialisation ground to a halt, coming to a stop with a chime. The Doctor activated the scanner. It showed a boxy room with a big window and cheap, overladen bookshelves. There were desks down both sides, and two single, neatly made beds. She smiled slowly. ‘Good thing Janine wasn’t in. Didn’t want to creep her out.’

The Doctor nodded, then raised a finger. He scurried round to her and hoisted a couple of suitcases.

She frowned. ‘You don’t need to be so nice, just because I’m going!’

‘Peri, Peri, Peri. I can’t have you leaving with such a bad impression of me’ He sniffed. ‘Contrary to what you might think, I did not shed all my gallantry with my last regeneration. What on Earth have you got in these?’ he gasped. He struggled through the outer door and dumped the bags in the room.

‘Just a few mementos’

‘Which reminds me’ The Doctor popped back into the TARDIS, emerging with his coat. He pulled the baseball cap from one of the pockets. ‘Here!’

‘Thanks.Thank you, Doctor.’

‘That’s fine. It didn’t really go with my ensemble:

She smiled again. ‘No, thanks for everything’

‘Ah.’

‘I *have* enjoyed it, y’know. It’s been... fun’

‘Good’

‘C’m’ere: She pulled the Doctor to her in a hug.

‘Ahem,’ he wheezed. ‘Would you mind?’

‘Oh, sure, sorry.’ She stepped back slowly.

‘No harm done,’ he winced. ‘Keep having fun, won’t you, Peri?’ He frowned. ‘And do try to stay out of trouble.’ ‘I will’

And remember me to Professor Foster, won’t you?’ he added, a little more brightly.

‘Goodbye’

‘Goodbye, Doctor.’

She watched the TARDIS grind out of existence. She looked at her luggage, then at the stack of books on the dorm’s desk, then at hers and

Janine’s beds. Rhodes, the bedraggled stuffed bear she’d had since she was six, sat waiting for her on her pillow.

‘Great,’ she smiled:There’s no place like home.’

The Doctor ran a finger along the console’s edge. ‘Everything spick and span and back to normal,’ he sighed.

‘I hope so.’ Peri shut the door, looking up at the scanner. ‘You always leave a part of yourself behind, don’t you?’

The Doctor puffed out his cheeks, but said nothing. Peri switched the scanner off. I’m - I’m ready to go now.’

A little too much home comfort?’

‘Something like that.’ She paused. ‘Doctor - we made the right choice, didn’t we?’

The Doctor ran a hand through his hair. ‘Kamelion - “Junior” was like any other teenager. She needed a sense of identity, that was all.What I took away from her made her who she was. Who *you* are’

‘Won’t it - won’t she be dangerous?’

‘Not at all. Your room-mate, your friends, your family, they’ll all add to that sense of identity. Any of her more - defensive capabilities are now back where they belong’ He patted the console. ‘Kamelion created a child from himself and the TARDIS, and in turn she helped the TARDIS to grow again. “The child is father of the woman” he quipped.

Peri smiled thinly. ‘I don’t think I’m ready for any other children just now.’ She hesitated by the door that led back into the interior of the TARDIS. guess I’m good for a few more adventures yet?

The Doctor leant on the console:I’m glad to hear it,’ he said quietly. She looked back at him, then opened the door and went inside.

Jonah
Todd Green

The old man sat up in the adjustable bed, stretching his arms and listening to his joints creak. Across the room a machine chirped, counting off the heartbeats until the operation. He was surrounded by the things - each one humming or beeping or hissing, a band playing a tune only it could hear. He'd been amazed the hospital could need so many machines for one man, considering none of them did anything but monitor his condition and alert the nurses if he suddenly died. Then again, he'd never given much thought to how it felt to be a patient. Once he'd been on the other side of this equation - ambitious, trying anything, struggling desperately to save a life. But his own life hadn't had purpose for a long time. It seemed contradictory to extend it, yet that's what was planned.

Everything had changed so quickly. Had it really been forty years since that night?

Jonah felt Dr Richard's hand clenching his tightly, as his guardian led him down the bright white corridor. Jonah didn't resist but every few paces, Dr Richard jerked him forward.

'Don't pull,' Jonah said, but Dr Richard would only walk faster. Jonah never understood the need to rush, and his legs were shorter.

His guardian pushed open a white door and pulled Jonah inside. They were in a hospital operating theatre - Jonah twisted his head, trying to take it in, but every instrument gleamed and there were so many it was difficult for him to settle on any one item for long. And almost immediately, Dr Richard had lifted Jonah to a table and sat him on it, then gently eased Jonah back until his head rested on the cold metal, and he could only see the track lights in the white ceiling.

Jonah could feel the straps binding his ankles, even before Dr Richard tightened them. 'You don't need to make them so tight,' he said. 'I won't try to get up.'

‘Relax,’ said Dr Richard, continuing to adjust straps:You know what will happen if we’re not careful. If you get an infection.You could die.’

Jonah relaxed. He knew to be careful, to avoid rough games outside and to let Dr Richard know if he cut himself. He knew to wear shoes and socks at all times, and to be extra gentle when he brushed his teeth or blew his nose. Once Dr Richard woke him saying he’d had an infection in his legs during the night, and had been to hospital, where they did emergency work. He didn’t remember going. His legs hurt, but they were already bandaged and he could stay home from school that week.

Despite that, he felt lucicy: most of the time he never felt different from any of the other boys in the fifth year. Yet Dr Richard’s steady warnings made him wonder... What if they didn’t catch the infections? Would it hurt? Would all the blood rush out of his body to make room for the disease? Would his bones break?

Dr Richard moved the poles into place next to the table. Later he’d hang the bags on the poles, the dripping bags that he would attach to Jonah’s arm with a long tube ending in a needle. Jonah felt Dr Richard restraining his right arm, then moments later, his left.After a second Dr Richard’s face appeared before him, neither smiling nor frowning, his mouth set in concentration, as he pushed Jonah’s head down and fixed a strap in place across his forehead.

Jonah closed his eyes.Would he see his parents in heaven? He couldn’t remember them. They were two figures in his imagination that he couldn’t make out. He spent hours before the mirror, staring at the spacing of his eyes or the length of his nose as he grew, searching for some clue as to what he’d look like as a grown-up.To what his parents had looked like.

Jonah could turn his face from side to side, and he followed Dr Richard as he worked his way around the room, turning his back to adjust something on a table a few feet away. When Dr Richard stepped away, Jonah saw his own face - himself, strapped to another table. He pulled at the straps at his wrists and ankles,

feeling them cut into his arms.'Who is that?' He stared at the other him - pale, his eyes sunken, his nostrils scabbed, and a bright trickle of blood rolling out the comer of this mouth.

Jonah pulled harder at the straps and his arms came free, then his legs. Without looking to see whether Dr Richard would push him down again, Jonah rolled himself quickly off the table.

'Don't go... ' Jonah's pale bleeding self struggled to sit up, reaching its arms towards him. He ran for the door.

'Nor Jonah's pyjamas caught on the desk chair in his bedroom, but he didn't stop to steady the chair or look back. He pushed open his bedroom door and ran into the hall. In his mind he was leaving the hospital room, and didn't see the walls or furniture in Dr Richard's house as he passed or crashed into them. In his mind, the bright white corridor eventually gave way to a heavy door and he pulled it open with all his strength, not daring to look behind him - the pale other him could be on him at any moment.

Jonah ran outside, his feet bare against the cold pavement. The streets of Southall were dark and deserted as he raced past parked cars, turned corners at random, dove through alleys and backyards, and sprinted across parks. Only after ten minutes did he dare turn his head round, still expecting to find hands reaching for him.

The street behind him was empty. Jonah blinked, seeing the streetlights, the cars, the unfamiliar row of homes. He was outside; no one was after him. But this wasn't a street he'd recognise in broad daylight. He stumbled to the corner, now aware of his cold feet, their soles scraped and blistered, his toes repeatedly stubbed.The pain of his cuts sent a shock through him as he imagined the dirt of the street working its way into his blood, making him sick.At the intersection Jonah looked up but saw only a bare pole, the signs missing that might have told him where he was standing.

There was a park along the block and Jonah walked on the grass, grateful for the slight softness against his sore feet. He couldn't have run very far, yet in the dark nothing was familiar. Ahead of him

loomed a shadow next to a bench - a tall box, the word ‘police’ printed at the top. There wasn’t a box like this anywhere near his house - where was he? He tried to think which way he’d turned before arriving there. But his mind was blank before the past five minutes. The rest was the nightmare. He slumped onto the bench, feeling the shock of the cold metal slats through his pyjamas. His nose tingled, the dampness running onto his lip. He wiped his sleeve across his mouth and nose, then realised his cheeks were wet as well. The chill breeze stung, but the tears didn’t stop. Crying was for babies: he was ten now; he could find his way home.

‘It’s a bit cold for pyjamas, don’t you think?’ said a voice behind him Jonah twisted on the bench to see a man smiling a few feet away, holding a soft green coat as an invitation toward him.

Jonah stood from the bench and took a few steps away. This was how children disappeared. A kind stranger in a deserted park, and next week his name in the papers. But this man’s eyes glimmered with innocence, his brown hair dangling unruly to his shoulders. Like a child in the shape of a grown-up.

‘I’m sure you’re frightened,’ the man said, waving the coat closer. ‘And cold. Take my coat, at least warm up’ He tossed the coat onto the bench, then stood a pace back, hugging himself in his shirtsleeves.

Jonah reached for the coat, his eyes locked on the man’s face. But the man didn’t move, his smile didn’t waver. Jonah slipped one sleeve on, the coat felt thin but immediately warmed his arm through. Jonah wrapped the rest of himself in it, but stayed beyond the man’s reach. He wouldn’t become one of those names in the paper.

The man nodded. ‘Better? I can never sleep at night,’ he said. Sometimes I go for a walk’

‘I’m lost,’ Jonah said. The man was a stranger, but he couldn’t help if he didn’t know there was a problem. He started to wipe his sleeve across his nose then stopped, realising it wasn’t his sleeve.

But the man waved him on. ‘Go ahead; that will wash right out, won’t it?’ He laughed, slapping his sides with his arms, stomping his feet on the path.

Jonah wiped. The tears had dried up as well. ‘I don’t know how I got here,’ he said. ‘I was running, I turned lots of corners’

‘I’ll wager we can find your way home,’ said the man. He took a step forward, and Jonah backed three steps away. The man stopped. It’s all right that you’re nervous.You should be careful of strangers. I’m called the Doctor?

Jonah stared at him.You were supposed to trust doctors, weren’t you? Doctors, teachers, policemen.And Dr Richard was a doctor.

‘You can tell me your name later,’ said the Doctor. He’d been staring, expecting a reply. ‘For now, tell me your street, and I’ll see if we can find our way there. I’ll walk ahead and you can follow until you’re sure’ He walked to the edge of the park and waited.

That made sense. Jonah could walk behind and keep an eye on him ‘I live with Dr Richard, on Beaconsfield, across from the school’ He waited hopefully while the Doctor looked up and down the street, finally nodding.

‘This way, then,’ he said, starting back the way Jonah had come. Jonah followed a few paces behind. At the corner the Doctor announced. left here,’ then waited just ahead until Jonah rounded the corner as well, somehow knowing exactly when to walk again without turning his head

‘You live with your doctor?’ the Doctor said:That inust be convenient:

‘I don’t have parents: said Jonah.

‘I’m sorry,’ said the Doctor.

‘It’s not bad,’ said Jonah. ‘Dr Richard takes care of me’

‘I’m sure he’ll be glad to see you’ The Doctor turned another corner. ‘Why were you running?’

‘I’m not supposed to run,’ said Jonah. Dr Richard was always saying he should slow down. ‘But sometimes - after school, I run to the park, and hide in the bushes. One time Dr Richard came looking for me, but he didn’t find me. He was really mad when I came home’

‘During the day it should be fine: the Doctor said. ‘If you like to run:

‘But I’m not supposed to’

‘Why is that?’

‘I’m sick,’ said Jonah.

‘You don’t look sick’

‘I have CGD: Jonah waited but the Doctor’s face still looked like he was asking a question. He took a deep breath. It was so hard to say:That means chron... chronigra... chronic grana...’ He coughed. ‘It’s really rare, almost no one else has it.And Dr Richard says if I run or hurt myself it could get worse’

The Doctor moved his mouth like he was trying to say the name himself. ‘Do you mean chronic granulomatous disorder?’

‘That sounds right,’ said Jonah. ‘CGD is easier to say.’

‘Then I understand why Dr Richard wouldn’t want you to run,’ said the Doctor. ‘Yet tonight you were running, outside, without your shoes’ Th1e49Doctor’s voice was even, not lecturing like Dr Richard might, warning him about getting infections.

‘I didn’t mean to come out without my shoes. I was confused,’ said Jonah. ‘I had a bad dream, I was running in the dream, then I was outside’ The street they were on was starting to look familiar - were they close to home after all?

‘That must have been quite a dream,’ said the Doctor.

‘I have bad dreams a lot,’ said Jonah. ‘Like almost every night’

‘Every night?’The Doctor stopped, scratching his chin:Your brain must really be trying to tell you something’

Jonah hadn’t thought the dreams were a message. It’s because I’m sick,’ he said. Dr Richard says CGD might give me bad dreams.’They carried on, Jonah now walking next to the Doctor, though still more than an arm’s length away. ‘It shouldn’t,’ said the Doctor. ‘CGD is a problem with your blood’

‘I know,’ said Jonah ‘Dr Richard is always taking tests of my blood.And the bad dreams are like tests. I’m in a hospital room, strapped to a table, and I can’t move’

‘That seems unnecessary’

‘It’s only in the dreams. I’m a lot sicker in them. With lots of cuts and sore spots on my face’

‘You do look quite well now,’ the Doctor said. ‘Only cold, and we took care of that’

‘It was bad last spring,’ said Jonah. ‘I missed a week of school’ ‘Does that happen often?’

Jonah tried to remember the time before. ‘Not too often. Dr Richard tests my blood a lot. I don’t like the tests, but then I can watch telly while he’s busy in the office downstairs’

‘You don’t help?’

‘No, he says not to go in, I might break something,’ said Jonah.

‘I’m sure you’d be careful:The Doctor gave Jonah’s shoulder a pat and looked ahead. Jonah didn’t flinch - just followed the Doctor’s gaze. They were on Jonah’s street, his house only a few doors ahead, all the lights shining out the windows, the other houses

dark.

‘You found it!’ he said.

‘I rather suspected I had,’ the Doctor said.

‘I’m in big trouble,’ said Jonah, running toward the house.

‘Nonsense. I’m sure Dr Richard’s only worried’ The Doctor hurried alongside as Jonah pushed through the door and blinked at the even brighter light inside.

In the room beyond, Dr Richard jumped up from the sofa, nearly dropping the telephone. ‘He’s back; he said to the phone, hanging it up. ‘Jonah, where have you been?’

‘I’m sorry; said Jonah. was lost, but the Doctor helped me: He turned and pointed at the Doctor leaning in the doorway.

‘I found him wandering in the park a few blocks away,’ said the Doctor. ‘Apparently he had a nightmare. I gave him my coat, but I couldn’t help with his shoes:

‘My feet really hurt now: Jonah wriggled out of the green coat and handed it back. ‘Here’s your coat, Doctor:

Dr Richard watched the Doctor take back his coat, then looked at Jonah’s feet. ‘Where are your shoes?’ he said.

In my room, I guess,’ Jonah said. didn’t mean to run outside:

‘Jonah, that was very foolish; said Dr Richard.’We’ll have to wash those cuts, and I’ll need a sample to test:

‘I’m sorry,’ said Jonah again.

‘I’m sure you’ll be fine, Jonah,’ said the Doctor.

Dr Richard looked back at the Doctor in the doorway, almost surprised he was still there:Yes, thank you; he said:Good night: Dr

Richard moved to close the door, waiting only a moment for the Doctor to move out of the way.

‘I’m just glad I could help. Good night - good night, Jonah:The Doctor smiled, stepping outside, and the door closed across him.

Dr Richard patted the sofa. ‘Wait here. I’ll bring my kit and some bandages for your feet:

Jonah sat. He couldn’t bear the samples - being stuck with needles, the vials, the cold metal against his skin. But Dr Richard knew best. Jonah didn’t want to become the sick boy from his dreams.

The next morning, the Doctor stood before the name plate: Richard Sterling, MD. It had been simple to trace Sterling’s surgery from the similar name plate at the house the night before; there weren’t that many ‘Dr Richard Sterling’ listings in the directory.

It was probably nothing. Surely Sterling had simply been worried about Jonah, too worried to make polite conversation with a stranger in the middle of the night. Yet he hadn’t seemed at all concerned about the nightmare. He’d hardly noticed Jonah’s bare, bruised feet until they’d pointed them out. But then, he’d been almost eager to see the Doctor out - had he been holding his anger back? Had he punished Jonah? He hadn’t even so much as laid an affectionate arm on the boy’s shoulder to welcome him back.

The Doctor forced a smile as he rang the bell. Some people just weren’t emotional. And Sterling had probably awakened from a deep sleep hearing Jonah leave. During the day, his humour would be different. And the Doctor knew it was important for Sterling to treat Jonah’s cuts immediately. Jonah was in remarkably good health for having CGD, looking no different than any other freckle-faced primary school boy. Sterling would want to keep him that way.

Sterling’s nurse answered the door. ‘Is Dr Sterling free for a few minutes?’ said the Doctor. Through his waiting room, his door open, the Doctor saw Dr Sterling at his desk, his eyes wide to see the Doctor in his doorway.

He recovered quickly. ‘Sally, show him in,’ he said, waving.

‘Thank you, Sally.’ The Doctor helped himself to a seat across from Sterling. ‘I’m sorry to disturb you. I trust Jonah is all right this morning.’

Sterling smiled.’Oh yes. I’ve treated his cuts, so he shouldn’t develop an infection.And thank you again, Doctor…?’

People were never content without a surname, it seemed. ‘Smith,’ the Doctor said. Sterling nodded.

‘Thank you, Dr Smith.And sorry for being so abrupt last night. I was only half awake, and worried’

‘Of course’ See, the Doctor told himself. No reason to be concerned here. ‘Jonah has chronic granulomatous disorder, and he’s had many infections. I watch him very closely.’

‘Understandable,’ said the Doctor. ‘He seems in extremely good health for having CGD.You’ve done very well by him’ Sterling drummed his fingers.’His health isn’t always so good. His blood doesn’t create hydrogen peroxide to fight infections.

But with regular treatment and monitoring, he may have a long life’

‘He mentioned he has nightmares often,’ the Doctor said. ‘I hope you weren’t too hard on him’

‘He has them on occasion,’ said Sterling. ‘Though he’s never run out of the house before’

‘I wonder if the treatment frightens him as much as the disease’ ‘I do have to take many samples’

‘Of course,’ said the Doctor. ‘But not on an operating table, I imagine’ ‘No,’ said Sterling. ‘Is that what he told you?’

‘He dreams he’s strapped down and can’t move,’ said the Doctor.

‘And bleeding, with scabs and sores’

‘I’ve described the possible results of untreated infections,’ said Sterling. ‘I hope I haven’t scared him. But he needs to take his condition seriously.’ Sterling smiled across the desk. reassure him Running outside isn’t going to help’

The Doctor nodded. Sterling seemed to be reassuring the Doctor as well. Like any concerned parent. ‘He’s lucky to have you,’ said the Doctor. And his parents...?’

‘Deceased,’ said Sterling. ‘Before I became aware of his condition and agreed to take charge of him’

‘And will you adopt him?’

Sterling blinked at him. ‘Adopt?’

‘I don’t mean to pry,’ said the Doctor, though his entire visit was prying. Just my curiosity.You seem very close to him:

‘I take care of Jonah. I’m his doctor,’ said Sterling, tapping his desk with a pencil.’But he might still find a home and a family. I’m unmarried; I work long hours. He would be happier with two parents, perhaps with other children’

‘Do you suppose that’s possible, given his condition?’ the Doctor asked. Why the hesitation? It nearly did seem as though the question had never come up before.

The door opened. ‘Sorry to interrupt,’ said Sally. ‘Brian’s here. It’s an emergency.’

Sterling was already around the desk and pushing through the door. A boy a few years older than Jonah was coming through the waiting room in a wheelchair, asleep, pushed by a tired woman.

‘I’ll see myself out,’ the Doctor said. ‘I’ve already taken enough of Dr Sterling’s time’

‘Yes, thank you, Dr Smith,’ said Sterling, distractedly.

The boy could have come from Jonah’s nightmares. He had the typical symptoms of CGD - a trickle of blood around his mouth, scabs on his fingertips. Suddenly he leaned far to one side, nearly tumbling from his chair. The Doctor knelt to help the woman straighten him.

‘Thank you,’ she said quickly.The poor woman had her hands full trying to bring him here, instead of...

‘Shouldn’t he be in hospital and not his doctor’s surgery?’The woman flinched, her cheeks flushing.The finished thought must have struck her like a slap. ‘I’m sorry, it’s not my business; the Doctor said.

‘Only Richard can help him ‘ The woman recovered and pushed Brian through the inside door.

The Doctor stared after them. What magic could Sterling perform that would help this boy - that would encourage his mother to bring him here instead of calling the ambulance? And yet, by his claims Sterling had worked a miraculous treatment on Jonah.

The Doctor closed the outside door behind him and started up the pavement. Hopefully Jonah would avoid midnight runs for a while. It would only take a couple of serious infections and a few years’ growth, and the Doctor could imagine him turning into Brian.They even had the same dark hair, the same splash of freckles across both cheeks.

That was curious. Coincidence? Though Brian had been transformed by the CGD, he could see a resemblance between the boys, now that he considered it. Nearly enough to think they were related.

He heard a voice behind him and turned to see Brian’s mother wheeling him out of Sterling’s surgery. It had only been minutes: how could she be leaving already? He’d at least have expected Sterling to keep the boy for a day’s observation, not send him on his way with a lolly. Yet there they were. Where could she be taking

him? Surely not home.

Mona watched Richard lift Brian from his chair into the car. She'd rushed Brian to Richard's surgery expecting the worst, but after one quick shot, Richard assured her that he would be fine with a few hours' rest. Well, awake. She wished she'd seen sooner how weak he'd become - she'd only been on the phone for a moment and suddenly he could barely sit up.And then he was unconscious.

'I'll manage him from here,' she said as Richard closed the door. Brian lay back against the seat, eyes closed, looking momentarily peaceful. Some days she hardly recognised her son through the disease, only seeing the dim ghost he'd already become. His skin pale, his eyes sunk into dark spots, he might as well be shrouded in a sheet.

As Richard returned to his surgery, Mona glanced up the road - was that Richard's colleague strolling along the pavement? From this distance she couldn't be sure, but he had the same long hair, the same green coat as the man he'd called 'Dr Smith', who'd questioned her in the surgery. Even after years of living with CGD she hadn't adjusted to the stares, the suggestions that her son should be in hospital, the murmurs behind her back. She knew what they were thinking:'He's nearly dead, isn't he?'There were mornings she wondered herself as she struggled to rouse him. Yet Richard had always been certain that he'd develop a treatment. And only Richard's confidence gave her the strength to help Brian through his days.

She looked again as she eased the car into traffic, but the man was gone. Soon things would be different. A few more treatments, a few more months for Brian to get stronger, and he'd be ready for the treatment. He'd be ready for Jonah.

As she pulled the car up to the curb at their flat, Brian already looked better, his colour more natural. Or was it the light? Mona went around to Brian's side of the car and set his chair by the door, then started to ease him into it.As she turned, her foot bumped the chair and it rolled just out of reach.The brakes weren't set. Brian was already halfway out of the car. He was barely six stone but her

arms were tired, her knees giving fast. She stared at his closed eyes, willing him to wake strong enough to pull himself up, just until she could slide the chair back into place. But he offered no help. She'd have to shift him back into the car and start over.

Suddenly the chair slid back into place, the brakes snapping to with a series of clicks. 'Here, allow me; came the voice of her good Samaritan, strong arms taking hold of Brian and easing him into the chair for her. 'Sorry to burst in - you seemed to need some assistance:

'Thank you: said Mona, not looking up until she'd fixed the straps across Brian's chest to keep him from falling forward out of the chair. Then she met the steady blue-eyed gaze of Richard's dark-haired colleague, who blinked in surprise at her, smiling slowly.

'What a coincidence!' he said after a moment. 'My friend lives right up the street: He waved vaguely along the row of flats, his arm pointing more at the sky than at any of them. Mona thought for a moment of asking his friend's name, but did it matter? 'Why would he have followed her? Besides, he'd been helpful. Another second and she might have dropped Brian.

'Yes, that's quite a... coincidence; she said. 'Again, thank you... Dr Smith, was it?' She moved to take the chair handles from him, but he held on.

Dr Smith nodded. T11 be glad to help you get him inside, Mrs...' 'Sterling. Mona; she said, automatically. 'Mona; he said. 'You're related to Dr Sterling?'

'His sister-in-law:

He nodded, as though that answered some question that had been troubling him 'You unlock the door, I'll wheel Brian up the ramp. You look exhausted:

That was true. Mona nodded, finding her latch-key in her purse and pushing the door open. Before she could turn, he'd whisked Brian over the threshold and into the hall 'Which way?' he called back.

‘Left, into the first bedroom,’ Mona said, leaving the door open. Just in case of trouble. But he was a friend of Richard’s.And perhaps he’d help shift Brian out of his chair and into bed, which would save her back. Without Brian being able to offer at least a little help by pushing himself up or leaning against her, she wouldn’t be able to move him much longer on her own.And how would she take care of him then?

Mona looked into Brian’s bedroom to see Dr Smith pulling the sheet up to Brian’s neck. ‘Sorry, I assumed that was your intent: Brian flicked his eyes once but didn’t wake.

‘Thank you. Richard recommended I take him straight to bed: Mona nodded. ‘He’s just had a treatment: hope that will help: said Dr Smith, though his glance at Brian suggested he didn’t believe it would.

‘Richard is confident it will; said Mona.

‘That’s good to hear: Dr Smith reached for the photograph on Brian’s desk, nodding to himself. ‘Is this Brian’s father with him?’

‘Yes, that’s him,’ she said, struggling to keep her smile. She could hardly stand. ‘Well...’

‘Unfortunate that Brian’s trip to the doctor couldn’t wait for his father to help,’ he said. ‘He’s at work?’

Mona glanced at the picture. ‘No. Lawrence isn’t much help these days,’ she said. ‘He left us several years ago. I haven’t heard from him since.’

‘I’m sorry’ said Dr Smith. ‘It must be very difficult for you.’

‘Richard takes good care of us,’ she said, motioning him out of the room so Brian could rest. He seemed to be dawdling, lost in thought. Did he often linger uninvited in people’s private lives? She closed the door behind them, edging toward the outside door. ‘He’s made great progress. Soon Brian will be strong enough for another

marrow transplant'

A marrow transplant? That's quite risky.'

'It can be, but we have a donor who's an exact match,' said Mona. Why was he asking so many questions? 'If that goes well Brian should be in a ,much better place.Anyhow...' She stretched, not wanting to be rude but hoping Dr Smith would take the hint.

'Is he planning the same treatments on Brian that he's used on Jonah? He's done an amazing job of keeping Jonah's CGD at bay, wouldn't you say?'

Mona dropped her arms, staring hard. What had Richard told him? 'You've seen Jonah?'

'Yes - I met him yesterday, in fact'

'Yesterday?' Mona said. 'You're the man who found Jonah last night, Aren't you?' He wasn't a colleague, then - Richard had said a stranger brought Jonah home.

Dr Smith nodded. 'It would be wonderful if Dr Sterling's treatments can restore Brian to Jonah's health. At the moment there's quite a contrast tween the boys.' He looked at younger Brian in the picture. 'But in this photograph... Brian must have been healthier then?

Here he could be Jonah's brother.'

Mona snatched the picture from his hands. She hadn't seen Jonah for several years. They'd moved to the far side of town, changed schools to insure that the boys' paths didn't cross. Jonah would be ten now, and nan was around twelve in the photograph. Of course there would be a resemblance.

Dr Smith was watching her. She glanced at the photo for several seconds as though thinking about his question:You think so?'

'Yes: He had moved closer - Mona stepped back, thankful she'd kept the door open.

‘I don’t see it’ She set the photograph on a side table and turned to the ‘front door, giving up any pretence. ‘Thank you again for your help.’

‘I’d almost believe it was a picture of Jonah.’

Why was he pressing her? ‘They’ve never even met!’ She held the door wide. ‘I really must get some rest:

‘I do hope Brian feels better,’ he said as he stepped out, not even seeming to notice the speed with which Mona pushed the door closed behind him.

She grabbed the telephone and dialled Richard’s private line. It probably didn’t matter that a stranger thought Jonah looked like Brian, but she thought she’d best warn him.

The photograph confirmed his suspicions. Mona denied it, but surely Jonah and Brian were brothers. Why keep them apart? Why tell Jonah he was an orphan? Mona had been quick to be rid of him once he made the connection. What answer was she hiding?

The Doctor considered another trip to Sterling’s surgery. But how likely would Sterling simply admit to whatever was going on, just to satisfy the curiosity of a nosy stranger? And if he were up to something, it was unlikely that evidence would be in his surgery. But perhaps back at Sterling’s home...

The Doctor rang Sterling’s bell, but there was no answer. At midday, Sterling was doubtless still at his surgery and Jonah at school.The Doctor picked through an array of keys on a chain, lining up each against the lock until he found one that slotted in. Was this the right thing to do? He’d not seen any evidence that Jonah was in danger; there could be a completely reasonable explanation. What was it, then? They were practically twins -he had to know why they were separated.

His skeleton key wouldn’t turn. ‘”Will open any door in Britain,” indeed,’ he said. He stuffed the keys into one pocket and drew a

large safety pin from another. He pressed one end of the pin into the lock, gave a gentle twist, and braced himself as the latch clicked and the door swung free. If someone was in, he'd talked himself out of far worse situations than a simple break-in.

The house was as quiet inside as the unanswered doorbell promised. The Doctor moved through the rooms, noting the books, dishes, and papers arranged with uncaring ease about the place. Where was the 'office' Jonah had mentioned? Every door was open, every cabinet unlocked. Then he found the door to the cellar, hurried down the stairs and discovered a locked door at the end of a short hall, which resisted both his skeleton keys and safety pin.The Doctor studied the door and its frame, then decided there was only one solution. He slammed his shoulder against the door, twice, and on the third try the jamb splintered and the door gave way. The Doctor fell forward into the hospital room from Jonah's nightmares.

The lights came on as the Doctor stood, and he turned quickly, half expecting that someone had followed him. But no one was there, just a blinking sensor light next to the switch. The room had the gleam of an operating theatre - various monitors and equipment ranged round two metal tables laying parallel, with straps as Jonah had described. A tank labelled 'haemoglobin' sat between the tables, with hoses running from each side to one of the tables. The equipment in the room was up to, if not beyond, hospital standards, but if Jonah needed a transfusion, why do it here?

A row of cabinets stood against the opposite wall, each labelled simply with the year, ten years in all. The Doctor pulled open a drawer at random, and found a year's worth of blood tests, the results nearly identical each week, the blood counts listed and the only comment 'no change'. It gave the impression that Sterling was expecting a change - for CGD symptoms to develop? There wasn't a patient's name, but surely the records were Jonah's. The Doctor reviewed three more years at random and found the same information, the same notes, and no mention of anything related to CGD.

The next set of cabinets were similar, each marked with the year - but starting seven years earlier. These records told a different story

- the counts fluctuating wildly from week to week, without hydrogen peroxide present to kill infections. The comments were painstakingly detailed -'Having difficulty swallowing', 'Granulomas now blocking digestive tract', 'Heavy bleeding at gums'.

These were the expected records of a CGD patient. But there were seventeen years recorded, and Jonah was only ten years old. Who else's records would Sterling have here in his home? Brian's? The Doctor supposed Brian was about seventeen.

The Doctor stared at the blood record in his hand, then looked at a random record from the first ten drawers. The counts in the ten-year-old patient had been normal, with all expected chemicals present including peroxide. He'd only noticed once he saw the contrast against the seventeen-year-old's records.These couldn't be Jonah's records.What about the infections Sterling had mentioned? Where were the symptoms? This patient clearly didn't have CGD - but who else's records could they be?

The cupboard above the cabinets held several notebooks, and the Doctor opened the nearest to find pages of journal-like entries, each with a date, each written in the same precise hand:

'B condition worsening,' one entry began. 'I have observed increased frequency and variety of infections from Staph and fungi. B responds to ,antibiotics case by case.Am prescribing preventative antibiotics after each but minor variations in bacteria require separate antibodies. Such Treatment is inefficient and error-prone, due to number and variety of infections'

The following pages detailed various infections that 'B' - Brian, the Doctor assumed - had suffered. Then, several weeks of entries later, the story changed: 'El ready for white blood cell transfusion. If all goes well, the new cells will attack B's current Staph infection and antibodies will not be necessary:

However, the following entry read: Antibiotics required. Today's blood sample shows no sign of H202 - the transfused cells did not produce any.' The Doctor shook his head as he turned the page. The transfiision of healthy cells should have produced hydrogen

peroxide to fight the infection, but the cells hadn't worked. Perhaps there hadn't been enough blood in the transfusion, or Brian's condition was too severe. Either way, the transfusion had failed.

In later entries, Sterling attempted larger blood transfusions, then marrow transplants, even gene therapy - all without success. None of the transfused cells produced any peroxide to kill infections, the marrow was rejected, the genetically altered cells died. But then Sterling hit upon another possibility: Marrow rejected due to size of transplant; the Doctor read. A full marrow transplant might fix B's immune system. Will need donor: Where would he find a donor? Bone marrow had to come from a family member, but there was only Mona, and the amount of marrow required would risk her life as well. The Doctor read on, learning how Sterling set about trying to create a donor whose marrow could be completely harvested for Brian. He'd clone Brian, and with gene therapy could replace the gene causing CGD with a healthy one.

After hundreds of attempts, Sterling succeeded when Brian was seven. The clone didn't have CGD, but was otherwise an identical match.

Mona had said they had a donor. And Jonah could pass for Brian's younger twin.

'Didn't your mother ever tell you not to read other people's diaries, Dr Smith?'

The Doctor glanced up at Sterling, who stood in the doorway. Sterling reached for the diary but the Doctor held it away

'You shouldn't leave them out where someone might find them:

'In the cellar - in a locked room - in a cupboard? I didn't think anyone would stumble onto them there; Sterling said.

'I'm just coming to the part where you debase science and compromise your ethics to thwart nature; said the Doctor. Jonah could be Brian's twin, but for the age difference.That didn't make sense. But a clone...'

‘You judge me; said Sterling.’But you’ve just read the story Nothing worked. I even tried building up Brian’s marrow with larger and larger donations from Jonah Nothing short of a full marrow transplant can save Brian:

‘No wonder Jonah had missed school. You took his marrow and told him he was sick?’

‘I couldn’t send him back to school for a few days; said Sterling. ‘I had to take quite a bit of marrow the last time:

‘Brian won’t survive another marrow transplant,’ said the Doctor. ‘That’s sad, but it’s how things are. If it’s his time, you can’t change that.’

‘I can. We’ll start with a massive transfusion of Jonah’s blood. Brian will be stable long enough for the marrow’

The Doctor stared at him ‘And what happens to Jonah?’

‘He’ll have served his purpose.’

‘He’s a human being! Cloned or not, it’s still murder. There’ll be questions...’

‘CGD is a terrible thing,’ said Sterling:One bad infection can mean the end.’ ‘But Jonah doesn’t seem to have the disease,’ said the Doctor. ‘You have ten years of normal blood tests here. Jonah’s.’

‘Jonah’s medical records will show a long, sad, history of infections and catastrophes that finally overcame him’ Sterling pointed to the seventeen year-old patient’s records.

‘That’s Brian’s history, isn’t it?’ said the Doctor.

Now it’s Jonah’s.’ Sterling motioned the Doctor away from the cabinets, pushing the drawers closed:Jonah won’t feel a thing.

Brian will get a new chance. Better than a slow, painful death.’

‘At least he’d have peace. And would already, by now, if you weren’t prolonging him unnaturally. The treatment you gave him today - a shot of Jonah’s blood, wasn’t it?’

‘I add some stimulants and vitamins,’ said Sterling, ‘to make the shot more potent.’

‘And you tell Jonah the samples are for his health:

‘Jonah only exists to help Brian. If I hadn’t cloned Brian -’

‘That’s irrelevant,’ the Doctor said. ‘You created a human being. Jonah’s the same as Brian now.’

‘He’s not the same,’ Sterling said:My nephew was smart, funny, athletic, loving. Before CGD turned him into a living corpse.

Before, he had a great future.And he’ll have one again.’

‘You’re blind,’ said the Doctor. ‘Jonah is, or can be all those things. More so once he’s free of this artificial restriction on his activities, from you pretending he has CGD’

‘It was necessary for Jonah to believe he had CGD:

There was a thud behind Sterling, near the door. The Doctor saw Jonah stumbling over the book bag he’d just dropped. How long had he been standing there? ‘I don’t have it?’ he said, his eyes filling with the details of the room - the machines, the tubes, the tables that populated his nightmares. ‘Dr Richard? I’m not sick?’ Jonah ran at the tables, crashing into one and grabbing it as he fell forward. “this is your office? I saw this room in my dreams.The hospital room - it’s here? It’s in the house?’

‘Calm down, Jonah,’ said Sterling.

‘Do I have CGD, or don’t I?’

‘Nothing’s changed, Jonah. You’re sick. You need to be careful,’ said

Sterling. ‘I’ve always taken care of you, you know that.’

Jonah looked from Sterling to the Doctor, who shook his head, gathering the diaries from the cupboard. ‘I don’t have it, do I? I was so careful.You wouldn’t let me do anything!’

Sterling turned and grabbed for the diaries. ‘Put those down!’ The Doctor pulled them out of his reach. ‘Don’t listen to him, Jonah You’ll be fine if you do as I say.’

‘It doesn’t matter! You said the dreams were nothing. Nothing!’ He backed toward the door. ‘This isn’t nothing!’ He ran out the door, his footsteps quickly retreating up the stairs.

The Doctor watched Sterling turn to follow and blocked his path.

‘Get out of my way,’ said Sterling. ‘Get out of this house. This isn’t your business’

‘I’ve made it my business,’ said the Doctor, shifting back and forth to block Sterling from the door.

Sterling shoved the Doctor to one side. ‘You won’t stop me,’ he said. ‘He’s only ten. He won’t have gotten far.’

‘Then I’d better give him a head start:The Doctor tripped Sterling with one foot, and slammed the door behind him as he rushed up the stairs. He propped a kitchen chair against the cellar door, which would only hold him a few moments. Would it be long enough?

If he could find Jonah, he could take him somewhere safe to live. After all, he could go anywhere, to any time. Jonah would be suffering from shock, but it was better to stumble onto the truth about his condition. It would have been hard to convince him he didn’t have CGD: Sterling’s years of reminders were so ingrained. Hopefully he’d not heard anything else. Discovering he was a clone as well would be more than anyone - let alone a child - could handle.

Outside, the Doctor glanced in all directions but Jonah wasn’t in

sight. He'd wasted valuable minutes with Sterling. Today Jonah had shoes on, he'd been running for a few minutes already. Where would a ten-year-old go for help? With no family, would he think to find the police? Or... would he just find a place to hide?

In the park, Jonah ran toward some bushes and pushed himself in. The prickly leaves parted and closed behind him and in seconds he was alone in green darkness, his throat rough from breathing hard and his heart pounding the walls of his chest. It was like his nightmares, only the white room was real. The tables - the straps - it had been right downstairs. When had Dr Richard taken him there? Why did he tell him he was sick, if he wasn't?

Seeing the lab forced the nightmare into his head until it felt full.At least he could wake up from a bad dream. Jonah dropped his head to his knees, making himself small so no one could see him. He felt the sting of scratches on his arms and knew he'd cut himself. He'd need a shot. Or would he? If he wasn't sick, could he cut himself? Did it matter? Why would Dr Richard lie? His arms were stinging worse now and he wished he'd had his snack before he went downstairs to see why Dr Richard was shouting.

'Jonah?' Jonah heard the voice calling but hunched further into his knees. He couldn't go back, he'd be in trouble for running away, he had to hide until it was over But how long was that? He stretched his neck and saw someone's legs walking along the path. 'Jonah, can you hear me? It's the Doctor.' Jonah stretched further. The Doctor was alone; Dr Richard hadn't come to get him. 'I know you're scared. But I'm worried about you'

The Doctor didn't seem angry at all, Jonah thought. The branches scratched him worse as he shifted to see the Doctor. The cold in the ground was working through his trousers and into his legs. And his legs were tingling, asleep from being folded under him. Jonah remembered that legs being asleep was something to do with his blood. Would his legs being asleep make him sicker? But he wasn't sick. He didn't know if it mattered anymore.

'Jonah, everything must be very confusing now. I can help you' The Doctor's voice was getting softer, he must be moving on, giving

up.The cold ground and his empty stomach and his stinging arms and tingling legs and sore throat all pushed at him until he felt the hot tears start to squeeze out. Anything was better than another minute making himself cry sitting here.

He pulled himself out of the bush and looked wildly until he spotted the Doctor in the twilight. ‘Doctor, wait!’ he said, tripping over his still tingling feet and hoping they would wake up soon.

‘Jonah?’ The Doctor stopped, turned back, ran toward him as he stumbled. ‘Jonah, you’re all right. You’re safe’ He set down a stack of notebooks he was carrying, and wrapped the coat onto Jonah’s shoulders. ‘Here, have my coat again’

‘I cut my arms,’ said Jonah. ‘Will I be sick?’

The Doctor smiled and stood, picking up the notebooks. ‘You’re not sick.A bandage is all you need’

Just a bandage. Just like any other boy. ‘Why did Dr Richard tell me I was sick? Why did he lie?’

The Doctor stood, taking Jonah’s hand. ‘We must hurry.’ He looked up and down the path, heading back the way he’d come. ‘Dr Richard kept many things from you,’ said the Doctor. He held up the notebooks. These are Dr Richard’s journals of the tests he did.And of your life.When you’re ready, you can read them’

Jonah didn’t remember anything before Dr Richard started taking care of him. ‘When can I go home?’

‘You can never go back there:The Doctor knelt so Jonah was looking directly in his eyes.’I know that must be hard to hear:

‘Never?’ Even though he had the nightmares, even though Dr Richard lied, he thought it would all be explained. But could he ever sleep again, knowing the hospital room was downstairs?

‘Dr Richard wasn’t well. He might have hurt you. Some day you’ll understand:

They walked back along the path, and there was the strange tall box by the bench again. ‘This is where we were last night; said Jonah. didn’t recognise it.We were close to home:

‘Jonah!’ Jonah turned and saw Dr Richard running toward him. The Doctor moved in front of him, fumbling at the door of the police box.

‘Jonah, I know what’s best for you; Dr Richard said. ‘You have to come home:

‘Stay away,’ the Doctor said. Jonah, you don’t have to listen to him.You’re not sick:

‘What do you think you’re doing? Calling the police?’ said Dr Richard. He turned to Jonah ‘You don’t know this man.

He’s not telling you the truth. Come with me: Dr Richard leaned toward him, reaching for Jonah around the Doctor. Jonah pulled away, feeling the tears coming back.What had he said in the room downstairs?

‘You lied to me; Jonah said. In the cellar, the Doctor said you were pretending I was sick:

‘He was wrong; Dr Richard said. ‘Jonah, you’re upset. You don’t know what you heard. Now come home: He reached again and took hold of Jonah’s arm. Jonah pulled away.

‘You didn’t know I was there,’ Jonah said. ‘You agreed with him.’

The Doctor opened the door of the box, and Jonah could see lights inside. But the box was so small...

‘Come home; Dr Richard said:Come home and I’ll explain: Jonah shook his head. He knew what he’d heard.

‘This way, Jonah; said the Doctor. He pushed Dr Richard back and they stepped into the box. The door closed behind them, Dr Richard

left outside.

‘Come out of there!’ There was a noise like wind swirling through a tunnel, back and forth. The police box vanished, the grass standing up as though it had never been there. Dr Richard walked forward, his hands raised as though he expected to run into the box. But there was nothing there.The Doctor and Jonah were gone.

The old man woke, the hospital room gradually coming into focus, pushing aside the dream and the memories. Jonah had never returned; he had never found him, or the mysterious Dr Smith. Eventually, he’d started Brian on other CGD treatments, without success. He’d even taken some tissue samples and started another round of cloning tests, but nothing developed. Jonah had been one lucky try in hundreds.

Sterling sighed, reaching for the journal laying by his bed. He’d long since stopped keeping notes on his experiments in his journal, now they were simply notes on himself. He re-read yesterday’s entry: ‘I’m feeling very little pain, thanks to the medications.This morning I forgot that I’m having the operation this week: Tomorrow, they said, the new heart would be fully grown in the tank and ready for transplant.

‘I cannot get out of bed, but no bother. Many people my age stay in their beds or wheelchairs due to failing heart or limbs At least they used to. Everyone can have organs replaced, now. When did the frailty of old age become unfashionable?’ The cloned heart might last another twenty years. Would he?

He’d thought about Brian more since he was diagnosed with heart failure, since the surgeon recommended a cloned heart transplant. He’d let them schedule the procedure, but it didn’t seem fair - science had made no difference for Brian in the end. He was gone, just a few weeks after Jonah’s disappearance. The other driver had been speeding, on the wrong side of the road when he struck Mona and Brian.They were both killed instantly. None of it mattered, not the CGD, not the clone, not his experiments. Not when it was his time. A speeding car got Brian, and there would never be a cure for that.

Sterling started a new entry in his journal: ‘Another day. What in God’s name will I do with another twenty years?’ he wrote. Will anyone notice If I’m still here? The only difference will be the name of the doctor who attends my final days. Everyone else who matters is already long gone.’

Sterling set down his pen and found the call button.

‘Yes?’The nurse arrived, looking at him expectantly.

‘I’ve changed my mind about the operation,’ he said. ‘I think I’ll go home today.’

Scribbles in Chalk
Gareth Wigmore

His feet were bare on the long grass; lifting them to move ahead should have been as simple as every footstep had been since he learned to walk as a child. But Low Joker could no more walk than he could fly.

Instinctively he looked down at his feet, seeing nothing in the darkness and wincing in sharp pain, the muscles in his neck seeming to spasm as they were forced into movement.The neck felt stiff, creaking as he angled it. Low Joker tried to lift his feet again, pushing back his left knee and going nowhere. He gasped, and his mouth felt sticky as he opened it. There was a gummy taste, a woody taste. He ran a thick tongue slowly along his teeth, and then bit down, breaking skin. Something flowed out, but it wasn't blood.

A cry strangled itself somewhere at the back of Low Joker's throat. He lurched forward in panic, beginning to realise what was happening, and found that all he could do was fall into a vertical foetal position, his knees buckling under him with a terrible crack. His left hand jerked out to steady himself, fingers digging into the soil. And he then found that he could not move them again. More than that, he could no longer tell where they ended and the ground began.

He'd heard of the changes happening to others, but had never let himself think that his body could turn on him like this.Yet here he was, his joints blossoming into knots, his hair tangling and lifting away from his head.

His right hand was still good, just, and Low Joker reached across to the hunting knife on his left hip. A whimper sounded from between his toughening lips as he held it in front of his chest for a second or two before he plunged the knife down, burying it where his heart had been beating seconds before, what remained of his voice rasping in terror.

The blade quivered in his wooden chest, but there was no blood, merely a trickle of sap, oozing gently towards its handle.The change had come on him too quickly. What was left of Low Joker realised his failure even as a rush of matter spiralled up from his neck, his head suddenly twenty feet tall, his free arm splitting into a dozen separate branches and stretching off away from his trunk, bursting into leaf as they did so.

When they came to look for Low Joker in the morning, they took some time to notice the extra tree with his knife embedded in it.

As the Doctor reached the top of the hill, he leant on his walking stick and breathed out with the air of a satisfied man This was a green and pleasant land that they'd found, no doubt about it, the perfect place for a convalescent such as Steven to recover from his wound. He was back at the camp even now, with 'Catarina looking after him The girl was devoted to him, a perfect nurse - although Steven seemed to have plenty more fervent admirers among some of the local girls, the old man thought with a chuckle. Yes, it was a miracle to have found such a place in their hour of need. He nodded in agreement with himself, looking back at the little village of tipis and tents that lay spread out below him Smoke was rising from the great fire in the centre of the camp; the Doctor wondered what would be for lunch when he returned from his half-stroll, half-investigation. A hospitable people, good food, simple but effective medicine - yes, this was a little bit of paradise, a place of perfection, as 'Catarina might say It was rather a hot paradise, though, with the sun creeping up towards the middle of the sky, and he took off his frock- coat and put it over one arm. He loosened his cravat and mopped his brow with a handkerchief, muttering a 'Dear me!' as he found that some of his long white hair was matted with sweat.Then he turned away from the settlement and set out again, down the other side of the hill towards the temporal fault, moving slowly but perfectly steadily.

The one thing that unsettled him about being here was the thought, at the back of his mind, that he and Steven - and Katarina too, if she wanted to come - would have to leave. That wouldn't normally have been a problem, but the only way they could do that was to go back through the hole in space and time that had led them here in

the first place. The Doctor had not had time to analyse it before Katarina had rushed through, hoping to find help for their wounded companion, help that the Lakhotha had willingly given. But could they make the journey back through the temporal fault safely? Well, they'd probably see soon enough.

It wasn't long before the Doctor reached its mouth, and he whiled away a good half-hour sitting on a nearby rock and watching the door-shaped crack in reality flicker and shimmer. Occasionally he jotted notes down on a piece of paper; once or twice he threw some stones through the fault-mouth, smiling at their failure to appear on its other side. If he'd thought about it, he might have realised that he didn't look much like a scientist making calculations that the people on this world would take tens of thousands of years just to begin to dream about. But then even he could barely begin to understand the temporal fault without proper instruments, and they were all locked away in the TARDIS, somewhere on its other side. He had a suspicion - no more than that - that it was not natural, but the result of some massive interference with the fabric of time itself. That was a worrying thought. Who would be mad and reckless enough to conduct such an experiment?

He was lost in thought when Katarina appeared with one of the natives, the one that they called Drinks-Pool-Dry The young people were both flushed and a little out of breath, presumably having taken the distance from the camp at something of a run, rushing about in a way the Doctor rather envied. The Trojan handmaiden was really a pretty thing now that she, Steven and the Lakhotha had got her to leave some of her shyness and awe behind her, little by little. The Doctor thought of Vicki, though, left behind in Katarina's barbaric time on Earth, and then of his own granddaughter. A picture of Chesterton and Barbara Wright flashed into his mind for a second, and a wave of tiredness and sadness - of oldness -washed over him So much change, and this old body was coming to the end of its time, too. Yet at least he had the young people around him to help him feel young.When they got back to the TARDIS, perhaps he could give Katarina the room that had been Vicki's, and Susan's before that. Perhaps he could show her the wonders of this universe, as he had both of them. The thought cheered him considerably.

‘Good day to you, Doctor,’ Katarina said, bowing her head respectfully. At least he’d got her to stop addressing him as a Greek deity. ‘We come to tell you that the new poultice that you and Healing Song prepared for Steven is working so well that he has been out of his tent this morning, playing with the children and calling for you’ She looked up, and glanced across at Drinks-Pool-Dry for a moment.

‘Oh, indeed?’ the Doctor replied, his eyebrows arching high into his forehead and his chin jutting up. ‘You didn’t decide to come for a walk simply to share the company of this handsome young brave alone, then?’

Drinks-Pool-Dry waited a second before guffawing. ‘It is I who came along to share the beautiful Katarina’s company, Doctor,’ he told him, a grin splitting his massive, copper-coloured face as he looked over at the girl. ‘She is like none of the Lakhotha, and I delight in her. Why should I not?’ Katarina blushed and looked down again, her face hidden behind her waves of dark hair.

The Doctor considered Drinks-Pool-Dry’s broad shoulders and muscled torso, naked save for lines of paint denoting his place in the tribe. He was a young man typical of his people, and the Doctor liked him well enough. His only clothing was the short kilt made of animal skin, and his body well showed the utter hairlessness that seemed at odds with the Lakhotha’s almost goat-like toes and feet. His name seemed apt for him; the Doctor believed he could do nothing half-heartedly, whether drinking, riding, hunting - or wooing his companion, come to think of it.

But the Doctor knew he shouldn’t tease Katarina. She couldn’t spar with him yet the way they all did eventually, once they’d got over the shock of the TARDIS and realised that his bark was worse than his bite. So he changed the subject.’Well,’ he said, picking up his coat and stickl don’t want to keep Steven waiting, not if he’s so much better. Healing Song knows her potions and poultices; goodness, yes.A remarkable woman.’ He flashed a smile at Drinks-Pool-Dry as he said this; it was true, but there was no harm in flattering the boy’s mother while he was in earshot.

‘She thinks very highly of you, Doctor,’ the brave replied with a glint in his eye. ‘Now that Steven is getting better, you ought to insist he keep watch outside your tent at night. My mother has been without a husband these nine years.’ At that, he elbowed Katarina playfully in the ribs.

The Doctor liked this young man more the longer he knew him, and didn’t mind being the butt of the joke one bit on hearing the giggle it got out of the normally grave Katarina. Taking someone like her from her certain death in the fall of Troy and bringing her to this place, watching her change and grow - well, it made his wandering, his exile, worthwhile. He thought he’d play along. ‘Oh ho! So that’s her game, is it? Well, you tell your mother I’m a slippery fish to catch, my lad. Now, shall we be heading back? I’m getting rather hungry for my dinner, after all’

It was that evening that Katarina surprised the Doctor by slipping into his tipi just as he was thinking about: the fluctuations in the temporal fault; the progress of Steven’s recovery from that sword-thrust back in Troy; the mysterious, seemingly bottomless pools that were Healing Song’s dark eyes, shining on the other side of the fire in his direction that evening; the curious arrangement of bones in the Lakhotha’s backward-bending knee joints; how much he was looking forward to a nap; and several other things at once.The girl was all meekness, avoiding whatever subject she’d come to talk about, but bit by bit he wheedled it out of her.

‘You’re happy? Why, child, whatever’s the matter with that?’ he said gently as she wept on his shoulder. ‘Why shouldn’t you be happy, hmm?’

‘Because - because...’ Katarina wiped her eyes on the handkerchief he had given her and straightened, looking up at him ‘Because I will die soon, Doctor. I know it. I did not grieve for that in Troy, but here -’

‘Hush, girl.That’s nonsense, as I’ve told you before,’ he began a little too harshly, setting her off into tears again. ‘Whoever told you that?’

‘My lady Cassandra, in Troy. And the auguries. That was why she chose me to be her handmaiden. My dove - it flew backwards and -’

‘It had no liver, you told me that before. But am I not wise? And do I not say that no one can predict their own death?’ He felt like a hypocrite as he said it, thinking of how, just earlier that day, he’d thought that his old body did not have long left itself.

‘Your words are comfort,’ Katarina said, mournfully, but bent her head back to his shoulder, and he stroked her hair and shushed her while she cried. ‘But there is more, Doctor.’ Her voice was weak through her sobs. ‘I do not feel that I shall die here, among the Lakhotha. I feel safe here’

The old man smiled, and thought that, well, it always happened, but that it didn’t seem to have taken long in this girl’s case:Then, my dear, you can stay for as long as you like, long after Steven and I have gone. That nice young man, Drinks-Pool-Dry - he seems fond of you, and if not him then I’m sure -’

‘No, Doctor!’ Katarina’s voice grew stronger in what sounded like frustration, and she pulled herself away from his shoulder and looked into his eyes. should like nothing more than to stay here among such a people. But that is not my fate. I know what destiny has in store for Katarina, handmaiden to the lady Cassandra ofTroy - and it is not long life and happiness.’

‘Now, child -’

The Doctor was taken aback when she interrupted him and said, with more conviction than he’d known her say anything before, ‘Although you are wise, you do not understand! I should not be here!’Then she jumped to her feet and scrambled out of the tipi and off into the Lakhotha village.

The old man was considerably more flustered by his second female visitor of the night. It seemed that Drinks-Pool-Dry had been right about placing a guard at the mouth of his tent, for there, waking him up in an imploring voice and shaking his shoulder, was the

boy's mother, Healing Song, duskily lit in the glow of a noxious-smelling candle.

'Oh, good heavens!' the Doctor gasped as his eyes opened and he shot upright in his bed of animal skins. 'Madam, you do me a rare honour I'm sure -' he began, before she cut him off by putting a finger to his lips.'Oh, dear me, dear me; he muttered under his breath. 'However I get myself into these situations, I don't know:

'Greetings, wise one; Healing Song said, kneeling beside him. 'The council of the tribe forbade me to come, but I could not prevent myself.'

'Oh, public knowledge, is it? Does the whole tribe know of your intentions? Dear me:The Doctor shook his head. 'You flatter me with your attention, Healing Song, but - 'Then he frowned.'Why in heaven would the council of the tribe forbid us? We're both grown adults. I've never heard of such a thing! The cheek of it!'

Healing Song seemed a little confused, and hushed him again. 'We must not be heard, Doctor, or they will be angry with me. I must consult you on a grave matter for which we have no remedy:

The Doctor looked at this primitive woman and decided - attractive though she was with her well proportioned features, smooth scalp, bare breasts, and the candle flickering on her red skin - there was no light of love in her black eyes. He breathed a sigh of considerable relief. 'My good lady, consult away by all means. I thought for a moment... No, never worry what I thought, though I'll have some words with that son of yours in the morning. No, my full attention is yours:

'So they honestly believe that this man has turned into a tree? That's ridiculous!' Steven said, bringing his good arm down with a flat palm as though dismissing the notion altogether, as he and Katarina listened to the Doctor's retelling of what he had heard the previous night.

The Trojan was bandaging Steven's shoulder, having just re-applied the new poultice that the Doctor and Healing Song had made up.

She had seen many men die of infected wounds like Steven's, and had been impressed at the skill with which the two wise elders had blended this herb and that to save his life.

'I mean,' Steven shouted, 'it's lunacy. Utter nonsense. Surely, Doctor.'

Katarina imperceptibly pulled on one side of Steven's bandage a little harder than was comfortable, making him gasp.

She did not know him well and, although she liked him, she thought him arrogant. 'It is not nonsense, Steven. Bodies can be changed from one shape into another shape. Why should they not, if the gods desire it?'

Steven looked at her blankly, as though she were stupid, and then at the other side of the tipi to the Doctor. 'You tell her, Doctor. She'll listen to you; you're Father Zeus, but I'm just her patient.'

'I know now that he is not a god; do not tease me, Steven. But he is like a god in wisdom.' Katarina was feeling guilty about her comments of the night before, and was pleased to see the Doctor bristle with a touch of pride on hearing her before batting away her flattery with a wave or two of his hand. 'The daughters of the sun-god became trees, such was their sorrow at the loss of their brother,' she added. 'And Cygnus -'

'So they did,' exclaimed the Doctor, cutting her off. 'How did Ovid put it? Let me see, let me see... "Bark wrapped itself around their thighs and spread, little by little, over womb, breast, shoulders, hands, till but their mouths remained, crying out for their mother in vain." Or some such. Hmm" He shook his head and shuddered. 'Horrible!'

Katarina frowned and asked, 'What is Ovid?'

'But it's not just trees,' the Doctor carried on. 'If what Healing Song told me last night is true, many of the people of this world have, for the past decade or so, been transformed into all manner of plants and animals -into almost every other natural form one can imagine,

from birds to fish to flowers. Some tribes have been wiped out altogether. Others, like the Lakhotha, have moved away from their traditional lands, hoping to outrun the phenomenon. But now it seems as though it has caught up with them again.'

The gods are judging them,' Katarina said with a shrug, looking with some pride at Steven flexing his shoulder muscles behind the newly finished bandage.

'Absolute nonsense,' her patient said, giving her that look again and his voice taking a tone to match. 'One body can't become another body. Has anyone seen it happen? Even if it's true, Doctor, there must be some scientific explanation - some genetic mutation - something more realistic than the judgment of the gods, Katarina:

She frowned at him 'Do not be so hasty, Steven. With this sickness, the gods seem to have judged you and spared you.They may yet change their minds' He raised his eyebrows, as if he thought it a threat. But it was a statement of fact to her - after all, the gods had fought on both sides in the war for Troy.

'The universe is extraordinary, Steven,' the Doctor counselled, a faraway look in his eyes. 'Some species do have the ability to transform themselves, cell by cell - to change themselves completely. I've never heard of anything quite like what the Lakhotha are talking about, and it's easy to scoff, but one must presume that anything is possible.'

Steven grunted flatly in reply. 'Anyway,' the Doctor continued, 'Healing Song - charming woman - wants me to help in any way I can, to see if I can provide some sort of explanation beyond the intervention of the gods'

Katarina decided to voice something that had been bothering her since they arrived in this place. 'The things that the people worship here are strange, Doctor,' she said, a little tentatively. 'The Lakhotha worship, but they do not worship Zeus and his heavenly companions. Perhaps that is why they are punished. The gods are quick to anger.'

The Doctor and Steven exchanged a glance that Katarina only just noticed before the old man slowly put his arm around her, and gently said, ‘Gods - beings of great power - have their own jurisdictions, you might say. We may have left that of the gods you know behind us’

Her first instinct was to deny it - the gods were the gods! - but Katarina had already seen many marvels since meeting the Doctor, so she nodded as she tried to understand. ‘Then there must be other gods here - other beings of great power - that are punishing the Lakhotha:

‘Gods?’ The Doctor pursed his lips. ‘Well, divine intervention is the Lakhotha’s best guess at the moment, I have to say.The leaders of the tribe are embarrassed and bewildered by the whole thing, and think the best solution is not to think about it in the hope that it will go away.’ His face broke into a crooked smile:But that’s never really the answer, is it, hmm?’

The Doctor asked a few discreet questions here and there that day. Accompanied by Low Joker’s family, he and Healing Song headed off for the new tree some little way from the camp, to inspect it and the flint dagger that seemed immovably fixed a few feet up in its trunk. It was not a kind of tree the scientist had examined before, although similar to many he’d seen on Earth and of the same species that littered the gentle hills surrounding the encampment. Its trunk was thick, twice the span of a man’s outstretched arms, with light brown bark and regular whorls, like a monkey puzzle But the branches began low down, fanning out on one side in a crazy crisscross of twig and leaf, getting in each other’s way in the search for light and air. The roots looked young and relatively loose and there were two sprawls of living wood that, with imagination, could have been said to look a little like legs. Low Joker’s mother cried; the Doctor patted her on the back without knowing what to say as the missing man’s brother tugged at the knife one last time.

When they were left alone, Healing Song walked around the young tree, putting out a hand to its bark. ‘I have known Low Joker all his life, Doctor,’ she said, sadly. ‘His mother and I have long been friends. He loved solitude, and quiet, and contemplation. He was

not as quick with his spear as my son when it came to the hunt - he was slow to act and cautious in judgment. But he did not deserve -' She broke off, letting her fingers run through the lower branches, and looked at the Doctor imploringly.

'You mustn't jump to conclusions, Healing Song!' he said, half-bemused, half-sympathetic. 'That tree is all tree. There's nothing of man about it, nothing to suggest that this Low Joker and the tree are one and the same'

'What about the knife?'

'It may be his knife, but why does that make him the tree, hmm? Perhaps he threw it - oh, I don't know - at some predator before it killed him, and it lodged in the tree'

'But he loved to stand and think in silence, like a tree,' she said, looking back at it. 'That is the way with the changes. A swift huntsman may become a wildcat, or a beautiful girl a rare flower. Our people have noted such things. Low Joker was like a tree, and he has become one'

'I understand your rationale - it's rather quaint, really - but you're seeing patterns where there are none, simply to justify these transformations to yourselves'

'But the tree is new! It was not there before!'

'You Lakhotha are a nomadic tribe, Healing Song. How long have your tipis been camped here? A month? You can't know all the landscape backwards, you know. One tree here or there - why, even the finest of your scouts might miscount or -'

The woman drew herself to a commanding height, and the Doctor thought what a fearsome people these gentle folk might have been if their world had been one of conflict and war. 'It is not possible, Doctor. You speak as one who does not know our ways. I am sorry I discussed this matter with an outsider. The council was right. You think us - you think me - foolish.'

‘You misunderstand! I highly esteem you and your people. But I am a man of science, and there is little in my experience to which I can compare your claims:The Doctor grabbed his lapels and fixed his glare on some point in the middle distance. ‘Caterpillars turn into butterflies, yes, and perhaps one could see some similar - although extraordinary - life pattern if all your changes were into trees, but you say that people become animals too, insects, all mariner of plants ... ‘ He looked back to her and fumbled for words she might understand. ‘Some wholly dramatic change in a person’s essence might be possible, if the right tools were in place within that person - if the right trigger for such a change were part of the Lakhotha’s flesh and bone and blood already - but it’s almost too fantastic... I need more information. If only I could see this change in action, study it, perhaps see what triggers it... ‘ His voice trailed off, and he noticed that Healing Song’s face had fallen. The wise old stranger had failed her, he realised Well, he couldn’t pull a rabbit out of every hat, and this was a curious hat to have stumbled on by any means. He took her outstretched arm and they headed back towards the smoke and cheerful noise of the village.

That evening, as every evening, the Lakhotha gathered around the main fire. The men had come fresh, if that was the word, from their steam tent, a custom the Doctor had found quite the most disgusting thing he’d come across in their week or two with the tribe. Meanwhile, the women had been chattering and pushing each other - it was a fascinating ritual - to get to the massive stewing pots that were to feed the tribe that night. Dancing began as the men arrived, their skin glowing and freshly adorned with paint, and the shadows lengthened in the early evening.

Katarina had tried to help the women with their cooking, but even as an honoured guest her status in the ritual process had merely been ninth or tenth from the pots, where she did little other than pass slabs of meat or handfuls of cereal or vegetable to the head cooks. The Doctor had watched it with a smile from the entrance to Steven’s tent, shouting a word of encouragement here or there until she came over to him as the men joined the women in the dance. ‘You did well, my girl; he told her. Another few tries and you’ll be in there with the pots and the herbs:

As though preparing the offerings at the altar,' Katarina nodded, sniffing. Actually, I'm rather hungry tonight. I suppose it's much the usual stew?' 'You tire of it, Doctor?'

' The old man shook his head before adding, 'Well, perhaps a little. I dare say I might be able to rustle up something a little less rustic back in the TARDIS, but it's good enough:

'It is luxury after Troy,' the girl said, her eyes wide and sincere. We handmaidens fed well - the lady Cassandra saw to that - but there was much hunger among the people. All the food was for the warriors and nobles, and the Greeks captured all our farmland outside the city walls' She smiled as though realising that that world was long left behind her. 'The Lakhotha have plenty of everything - beasts of burden, crops, herbs -'

'And getting more of them all the time, apparently,' Steven interjected, rising from the mouth of the tent and standing next to his companions, his shoulder still in Katarina's bandage.

The Doctor harrumphed, a note of puzzlement and unease. 'Best keep quiet about that, my boy, best keep quiet. I've -'

At that moment Drinks-Pool-Dry approached and, beaming down at Katarina, ushered the travellers into the throng.

The evening was one of the happiest the Doctor could remember in his long series of travels, with both his young companions dancing and flirting with pretty Lakhotha, while he was busy chatting with Healing Song and various other elders of the tribe. The food was good and as plentiful as Katarina could have wanted; the song was loud and cheerful; there seemed nothing but contentment for the evening.

And then it changed into a scene such as the Doctor hadn't witnessed in even his most vivid nightmares.

The beautiful girl sitting in Steven's lap was the first that the Doctor noticed, alerted by the space pilot's cries. One moment she was leaning back on to Steven's good shoulder, taking care to avoid his

injury and pushing her bald head back to whisper into his ear. A bare and willowy arm was stretched out, the fingers in his dark, curling hair, a giggle on her lips. In a second she was coughing in agony, writhing in every direction at once and sending Steven sprawling backwards. Even as she lay on him, the hair was beginning to burst out of her every pore - stiff, straight, coarse brown hair.

The Doctor stood up in alarm, his bowl of hot stew scattering to his side and over Healing Song's stomach and legs. But Healing Song didn't feel it: her copper skin was toughening into a dark green hide, suddenly cracking into a patchwork of scales. He caught one horrible glimpse of her anguished face before she hid it on the ground and was glad he could see no more - the impression he'd got was of rows and rows of serrated teeth springing from a hideously elongated mouth. Her hands shrank and great claws sprung from her fmgertips as she sprawled in the dirt on her belly.

The air was thick with screams, and over that were indescribable sounds of bodies twisting, expanding, shrinking, changing, but the Doctor could still hear himself shouting in horror.

He glanced to his other side and saw one of the elders of the council standing open-mouthed at the mayhem, before suddenly shattering into a thousand purple leaves, his body whittled in a moment to the stem of some great bush.The girl who'd been with Steven was an almost formless mass of hair for a second, until a great maw began to push itself from the front of her head, a canine nose and snout forming.

From somewhere behind the Doctor there seemed to be an enormous inrush of air and energy; he whirled round to see the body and head of a Lakhotha brave split in ten or twelve, each segment twisting upwards and expanding, blooming into leaf and flower. Beside him, his wife or mother was disappearing into nothing as she became an insect or tiny plant, her shrill screams dying away. Another woman was sprawling on the ground, her limbs zipping back into her torso as it elongated into a snake-form.

Steven was rolling away from the she-wolf that his Lakhotha girl

was becoming, trying to get himself clear and back to a tent. But where was Katarina? The Doctor looked round for her in panic. Drinks-Pool-Dry was by her side on all fours, roaring at the grass, feathers beginning to cover his arms and legs as his nose began to hook and harden into a beak. Katarina put out a hand to his back to comfort him, only to recoil as his wide shoulders halved in size and she saw his hands smooth into wing-tips.

The Doctor moved swiftly to her, slipping on a man-fish whose life was ending almost as soon as it had begun as its gills looked in vain for water. Another tree burst into existence behind the old man as he went, its lower branches scattering the cooking pots and trailing into the fire, burning instantly. He slapped Katarina twice on the cheeks, silencing her sobs, and bundled an arm round her, shielding her from as much of the scene as he could. There was Steven, crouching in the firelight by a tent mouth, his body shaking in terror.

But it wasn't just terror. Steven's limbs were flattening and twisting as though trying to decide what shape they would become. The Doctor looked across at Katarina, and she looked at him, and then both of them were screaming as their insides boiled and shook. He saw the girl's face began to melt, and his own must have done the same. His legs gave under him and he was panting on the grass, suddenly back in charge of himself again, as though he had been passed over. Katarina was out cold, but she was herself. Steven crawled over to them, jabbering incoherently but he too was not changed; he and the Doctor helped each other upright and then Steven lifted the Trojan girl into his arms, wincing as his shoulder wound bit at him.

'We must run for the temporal fault, Steven!' the Doctor shouted over the din. 'We must run and not look back for a second!' A great bird that had a minute earlier been Drinks-Pool-Dry screeched into their faces as it whirled past on new wings, but the Doctor and Steven were already rushing away from the firelight of the camp.

'I've got to rest, Doctor!' Steven gasped after they'd put the second of two large hills between themselves and the Lakhotha camp, and he dropped to the ground, the unconscious Katarina whimpering as

her head bounced against his knees.The Doctor staggered at his side, leaning on his stick and spluttering out a cough.The two men didn't speak for a full five minutes as they recovered their breath and tried to grapple with what they'd just experienced.

'Okay, Doctor,' Steven said after a while, his face visibly ashen in the light reflected from a small moon:Let's suppose there's something in this story you've heard about people turning into trees...'

The Doctor frowned at the graveyard humour. 'What a terrible fate for those people!' he said. 'Those good, kind people!'

'You know what Katarina would say. The gods judged them.' Steven snorted a derisory laugh. 'And what about us? She'd say they judged us too, and that we passed their test. Why?'

The Doctor made a show of pulling himself together, trying to put his sweaty hair back into place and to straighten his jacket and cravat. 'Come on, my boy. There'll be time for questions when we're through that temporal fault and safe in the TARDIS:

'But you aren't sure that it'll be safe to go back through that thing'

'Well, I'm sure it'll be safer than staying here. Something brought about that change in the Lakhotha:The Doctor's eyes narrowed:It was as though there was some signal - yes, a signal - that set it in motion.And we were affected too.And who's to say that next time we won't be more seriously affected, hmm? What's more, some of those animals looked as though they'd happily make a snack of us! No, let's get away from this place'

A little distance away, the fault-mouth shimmered like a beacon in the darkness.As they reached it, the Doctor cried out, 'Let's just walk straight through, Steven! Don't even think of stopping!' And the dishevelled old man led the way, disappearing into the hole in space and time a second before the spaceman, struggling with the ancient Trojan in his arms, followed after.

Lights flickered. Colours rippled through the spectrum. Every sound

in history seemed siphoned into an instant's blare.The temporal fault sucked the three travellers five hundred years into its own future and spat them out on the once lush hillside that had become little more than a grey pile of slag, where the TARDIS stood waiting.

When the Doctor opened his eyes, he wrenched himself upright, turned just quickly enough and was violently sick on the ground.Time shock, he thought; a massive time shock. He could barely remember his name or put one thought in front of another, but as he looked around him he knew that it was his friends, Steven and Katarina, lying on the slag, and that he had to try to help them. Stumbling to his feet, he lurched to the TARDIS and opened the doors, and then he dragged his friends inside, one after the other.

It was Katarina who came round first, mumbling nonsense only a few minutes after the Doctor had laid the young people side by side on the floor of the console room. He fussed around her, fetching her water and some pillows so that she could sit up, and expecting her to be as sick as he had been. Then he braced himself for the inevitable questions about the Lakhotha and the nightmare she'd seen around the campfire.

But they never came. Instead, her first words were,'We did not find help for your priest, great god?'Then she looked about her, seemingly puzzled, and said, 'How is that we come to be back here, in your temple? We were outside, about to go through the magic door.You were telling me not to go, but it pulled me in... '

The Doctor frowned in sorrow, thinking that her fragile young mind had cracked in shock and was refusing to let her remember what she'd seen that night.

'Your priest's sickness worsens; Katarina said matter-of-factly, looking down at Steven and removing his bandage. He moaned in his sleep, and the Doctor noticed beads of feverish sweat on the young man's brow. Then, with a lurch of his stomach, the Doctor realised that Katarina had not unwrapped the bandage that she had put on the wound in the Lakhotha village. Instead, she had unwrapped the first, makeshift bandage with which she'd dressed it

on entering the TARDIS weeks ago, just after they'd set off from Troy. It was impossible!

'What! But he was better! We found help - the Lakhotha - on the other side of the temporal fault!'

Katarina looked up at him blankly:I am afraid he will die unless we can find help for him, Doctor:

The Doctor got down on to his knees and grabbed the girl by the shoulders. 'Listen, child! You remember nothing - Drinks-Pool-Dry - the Lakhotha and their camp - those horrible metamorphoses - Healing Song...?' He realised that she thought he was raving, and looked down at Steven. His wound was back, as livid and infected as when he'd got it from a Trojan warrior. 'But how...' His eyes widened as he realised what must have happened. 'Well, I never... The temporal fault - it must have skewed your memories, your perceptions, even your bodies and Steven's injury! It's as though you were never there! But I was, and I remember it all, Katarina! And how I wish I didn't.The time shock knocked me for six, too, but my people aren't quite so susceptible to it as humans. It's wiped both your slates quite clean!' He even permitted himself a little shocked chuckle. 'Perhaps you weren't meant to be there after all:

The Trojan shook her head in helplessness. 'Your words are strange, great one. I do not understand. But your priest - we must help Steven!'

As the Doctor approached the collection of ugly, box-like buildings that must surely mean some sort of civilisation, he tried to focus on his mission - to find drugs to save Steven - and found himself sorely tried in doing so. Although his time in the Lakhotha village had done him good and restored him mentally, the double shock of the tribe being wiped out in that way, followed by the journey back through the temporal fault, had left him exhausted again. He'd had almost as much adventure as he could stand. Age would bring its own changes on his old body soon enough.

He knew that the temporal fault had brought them hundreds of years beyond the events they'd witnessed among the Lakhotha, and

there was something of the old landscape he'd grown to know in this strange grey world. What could have happened? It was horrible to see such lack of life in a place that had been so full of it. Where had all the people and animals gone? A few unhealthy-looking trees still dotted the landscape; he tended to avoid them, almost out of courtesy.

All was silent and motionless, save for himself, bustling across the monochrome plain and beginning to focus on the city, thinking of his dying friend. If only he could fmd some help here! Someone must have built it, someone advanced. But there was no sign of life.

Eventually he came to the first building, an enormous plastic and metal construct, and began to search for something approximating a door. He searched the perimeter of all four sides; nothing. The second building looked exactly the same, the two being linked by some chutes so high up it hurt the Doctor to crane his neck up to look at them. He began his search again patiently; nothing. When it came to the third building, he tapped on the featureless wall in front of him and found it gratifyingly thin. Then he took an object a little bigger than a screwdriver from his coat pocket and clicked a button on it. There was a hum of power, and sparks flew as he used it to quickly trace the shape of a door on the metal. Tapping the outline once, he made a little noise of satisfaction at the back of his throat as it fell forwards, and then he stepped through the makeshift entrance.

The space that the Doctor had entered was a vast cathedral of mechanical parts, with innumerable pipes and tubes filling hundreds of feet above his head up to the ceiling.They were mostly at right angles and all turning silently but very quickly, stretching off almost as far as the Doctor could see. The great vanes of giant turbines rotated; vast bundles of cabling threaded themselves at enormous speed throughout the complex; motors pulled machine parts this way and that, all in eerie quietness. It was as though he had stepped into a mechanical beehive.

Two rectangular objects, each about the size and shape of a domestic refrigerator like those he'd seen on twentieth-century Earth, floated down from above. One was metallic grey, the other a

dull black colour, and they came to rest across from him, hovering a few inches above the ground. Both were utterly featureless except for a strip of lights at the base.

<You are from the anomaly.> The grey machine's lights flashed in time with its speech, which had an undulating but non-organic quality.

'The anomaly? Oh, I suppose you mean the temporal fault. Is that your doing?'

<No. It is an anomaly,> it replied.

'It is, and I must find out who's responsible for it...' Remembering the business in hand, the Doctor pulled himself upright and nodded gravely at the grey machine 'I am the Doctor. I am a traveller, and I require medical assistance for a friend.'

<An animate?>

'Yes, I suppose so; a human, from the planet Earth.'

<The Conduit have not encountered humans from the planet Earth. You are human? You are from Earth?>

'No,' the Doctor admitted, 'though I'm not dissimilar in some ways.You are the Conduit, you say?'

<We are the Conduit.>

'Yes, how interesting. I wonder who you were a conduit for, and what happened to them... And you are not - how did you put it - animate?'The Doctor thought of Steven, and those festering germs in his wound:So you would have no medicine for my friend?'

<We have no medicine.>

'Would anyone else hereabouts?'

<There are no sentient animates on this world.>

The Doctor was taken aback. ‘There certainly used to be.’ He said it rather like a schoolmaster addressing unruly pupils;

he’d taken a bit of a dislike to these tin boxes and their smug, singsong manner.

<We changed them.>

‘You changed them?’

<We changed them into non-sentient animates.>

Though he wanted to lash out at them, the Doctor checked himself and considered the two Conduit machines with a scientist’s eye. They didn’t look like they had weapons of any sort, but he couldn’t afford to act rashly: if what they said was true, they obviously had immense power:And why did you do that?’ he asked, his voice clipped and stern.

<We needed this planet and its resources quickly. The sentient animates would have resisted our presence and slowed us down. Non-sentient animates cannot resist. It is standard.>

The Doctor felt his gorge rising. ‘It is not standard! Those were intelligent people, and you transformed them - turned them into animals and trees - against their will!’

<It is standard Conduit land-management programme three. We did not kill the animates.>

The soft voice showed no sign of anger at being questioned and challenged.

‘You might as well have done!’

<We would not kill. When our parts are required elsewhere, we are changed into non-sentient parts. We did not require the animates’ sentience. We required their non-sentience. So we changed them.>

‘You unthinking, logical brutes,’ the Doctor said sadly, suddenly feeling terribly tired again. ‘What you say is utterly monstrous. Monstrous!’

The grey machine had done all the talking, but now the black Conduit swung an inch or two forward and its lights flashed.

Its voice, however, remained indistinguishable from the other’s.

<Chemical analysis of your digestive tract indicates that you carry our agent.>

‘What?’ the Doctor asked, rattled and taking a step backwards.

<When our creators’ probes found this world millennia ago,> the Conduit explained calmly, <we foresaw that we might require it and its resources. So we seeded it with our bio-agent. Before we returned here, we activated the agent and changed the sentient animates - >

‘Into non-sentient animates; so I’ve gathered,’ the Doctor finished for it. ‘So what’s this you say? That I’m a carrier for your agent? That it’s in my digestion? What is this agent, then?’

<It was a crop for the animates. A cereal that we knew they would harvest and eat. We designed it to be easy for them to grow and nourishing for them to consume.There has been none on this planet for four hundred and seventy-six years.Yet your digestive tract carries it.>

‘And you put a little extra in their crop for them.Yes, you engineered a little surprise in it, to use if ever you needed to get rid of the Lakhotha and the other tribes - a genetic trigger to transform their DNA. But it didn’t work on me or my friends - you hadn’t designed it with us in mind. You killed an entire species, without compassion or mercy -’

<We did not kill them,> the grey Conduit insisted.

The old man rapped his stick on the ground angrily. ‘Don’t split

hairs. You wiped them out.And no one knows it but me - not even Steven and Katarina. I'm the only person who knows they even existed.'

The Conduit did not reply. The Doctor glanced from one faceless machine to the other, thoughts of Steven now uppermost in his mind. Although there was a fight here, it was a fight for another day - a day when he felt younger and more capable of dealing with creatures of such unthinking cruelty 'Your science is remarkable,' he told the Conduit, 'but your logic despicable and grotesque. I hope I never encounter you again. And if I do, I shall teach you a lesson; that is *my* standard. But I don't have the time. I shall leave this graveyard planet now - have no fear on my account:

As he left the building, he didn't look back, so he didn't see the two Conduit machines dismantling themselves, their parts floating gently back to be redistributed into a thousand different places high up in their machine city, now that their task was over. Behind him, the door he had had created sealed up, seemingly of its own volition.

The Doctor contained his anger. It could do nothing for Steven now, and Steven's life was his priority. But on his way back to the Ship, he walked out of his way for a moment to rest in the shade of a great old tree a hundred feet high, its bark aged green with lichen, its branches curiously spread out on only one side. Thousands of its seed pods were scattered around the bare grass beneath it, and he bent double to pick a few up, idly putting them in his coat pocket.

As he stooped, the Doctor's eyes were level with the handle of Low Joker's knife, still embedded where the brave's heart had beaten half a millennium earlier.The old man would probably have noticed it, if his eyes hadn't been awash with tears.

The End
Alexander Leithes

The Doctor watched the two halves of the ceremonial ribbon drift apart in the still, rare air, scissors still clutched in his right hand. From the wooden inauguration platform he looked out across the dark and stony plane towards the buildings some two hundred metres in front of him. They were of many differing designs, connected into a single complex by open- air paths and covered corridors. Various artificial light sources threw some areas into stark clarity, while leaving others in mysterious shadow.Yet it was still plain enough that all these constructions were in pristine condition: brand new, like the platform, but with an aura of permanency.

Above the Doctor and his companions was what seemed like a night sky, although the Doctor knew it was not. Across almost its entire expanse it was dotted with stars, galaxies and nebulae, as one might expect at night on any planet with a thin enough atmosphere. Just to the left of the buildings, a small way above the horizon, was a patch of sky that told the Doctor otherwise. A perfectly circular area, roughly double the diameter of Earth's moon when viewed from the Earth, in which no stars could be seen. No fluke of stellar distribution this, but the Schwartzchild radius of the planet's long dead sun; a black hole.

The surface of the planet seemed to echo the state of its dead companion, black and lifeless under the dim light of the stars.The Doctor knew, though, that these rocks were in fact of many shades of grey, silver and pink, when exposed to stronger illumination - and that they concealed still more potential. Beneath their covering, huge tidal forces caused by the proximity of the black hole and the strength of its gravitational field created vast amounts of geothermal energy. This in its turn was harnessed by power generators, supplying the buildings on the surface with all they would ever need.Also beneath the surface were vast caverns in which the atmospheric generation plants worked tirelessly to breathe life over this seemingly dead world. The Doctor felt oddly

comforted by the thought that this sun and planet, both in the twilight of their lives, could still prove useful, providing a home and resting place for his knowledge and experience. He turned to his companions, all gathered upon the platform, and smiled.

‘It’s complete:

The handful of individuals he was addressing were as wildly eclectic a bunch as you were ever likely to meet. Radregh the Alsheen was vaguely human in proportions, but had limbs that were far thinner and more tubular than any man’s. His head was supported on a similarly spindly neck and looked precariously balanced given its large size. It was about the size and shape of a large pumpkin, an impression strengthened still further by his wide deep-set eyes and broad mouth. His skin was a mottled purple colour, and about his shoulders he wore a three-quarter-length blue cloak. In his deep, near-monotonous voice he responded to the Doctor.

‘The Institute of Time. Your dream - all our dreams - made reality. A place where those of us who wander time may congregate to pool our knowledge, to discover all we can about our universe, and hopefully build a better future’

The Doctor acknowledged this with a nod. ‘I can hardly believe it myself. I’ve dreamt about it for so long, seeing it here makes me wonder if I’m still sleeping’

The second of the Doctor’s companions now chose to speak. The Hive was enclosed in a hollow Perspex cube roughly one and a half foot along each side.This sat upon a motorised wheeled plinth, which supported the cube at about chest height. Small electrical control wires ran between the cube and the plinth.Within the cube buzzed the Hive itself. One thousand red and black bee-like insects flew, walked and danced about, their actions all part of the thought processes of the collective mind of the Hive. Occasionally one or more of the ‘bees’ would fly in or out of the tiny circular air holes drilled around the cube. Radregh looked particularly nervous when they approached him, his intellectual acceptance of the Hive as a fellow time traveller and seeker after truth not entirely suppressing

his instinctual aversion to flying, stinging insects. The Hive spoke by means of a computerised voice synthesiser.

‘And when, dear Doctor, did you first come up with this idea?’ The Doctor frowned, for the first time unsure of himself.

‘You know, I’m not sure. I’ve been through so many regenerations it becomes difficult sometimes to pin things down. The memory starts to fade after the first thousand years’ And even more so, he thought to himself, at the tail end of a regeneration: his failing memory was a further sign that his eighth life would soon be over.

Two mechanical arms folded out from the Hive’s plinth and gesticulated, encouraging the Doctor to continue.

‘I’ve a feeling that I may have been carrying this idea around from when I first became isolated from the others of my race’

A gentle hum filled the air, a pure note.This came from Hactrix and was his habitual way of introducing himself before speaking. He was a solid, transparent, red tetrahedral crystal about nine inches high. He hovered six feet above the ground, his thoughts alone manipulating the forces that allowed him to do so. In a similar way, he could use his own body as a speaker and produce a vast range of sounds simply by altering the speed and amplitude of oscillations of the atoms within his crystal lattice. The note he was currently producing was his own resonant frequency.

‘How so?’ came the question, as clear as a bell.

The Doctor shrugged.

‘I’m not sure. Keen as I was to leave, I suppose I never really got over the loss of the company of so many like-minded individuals. I knew I’d never quite see eye to eye with them; we were always at odds with each other, in terms of our methodology. In more recent years I have come to consider that even I can’t carry on indefinitely, that others should share in the task of exploring our universe.’

He tapped his head lightly.

‘There are an awful lot of eggs stored in this one basket, you know. I fear, should the weave unravel, all I’ve ever seen shall be lost forever. A certain sense of foreboding has been plaguing me lately, along with increasing tiredness. I’m so far away now from my brethren.’

This last statement from the Doctor seemed disjointed, and distinctly wistful. He paused for a moment looking downwards, his eyes glazed. Finally he shook himself out of his reverie.

‘I also thought that it might be nice to have somewhere to rest, to receive news of other’s adventures and review them at my leisure.And so I began to think of other races I knew who also travelled through time, and in particular certain individuals within those races who had shown a keen interest in the universe and the pursuit of truth.As I met you in the course of my travels, over time as it were, I began to be more convinced that this institute could be made a reality.’

He paused for a moment.

‘I’m still amazed, my friends’

A chuckle went around the group as they congratulated one another. The two remaining members were the reptilian

Kom and the mobile vaguely rosebush-like plant-creature, Reesha. This small assembly, whose powers had rendered this ideal in rock, steel and glass, were only the beginning of course.They all hoped to add to their numbers over time as they encountered similarly-minded explorers.

‘Well,’ Hactrix announced momentously, ‘with our combined efforts this institute should live up to its name, and survive to the end of time. It’s been built to last’

The Doctor raised an eyebrow in the merest suggestion of doubt, but he was forced to agree.

‘I had that in mind certainly when I picked this planet as the foundation of our institute. Black holes are so much more stable than stars: none of this worrying about red giant phases or supernovae. People always assume there’s no energy to be had from them either, simply for lack of that showy EM radiation, light and heat and the like. But our geothermal power stations should drive the Institute and its systems for as long as we need them.’

‘Until the end of the universe!’ Reesha rustled.

The Doctor frowned.

‘Perhaps.’

The Hive’s synthetic laugh crackled forth.

‘Why not? The institute seems durable enough. And each of us is as long-lived as any life form is ever likely to be. In our own ways we have all conquered our own mortality.There’s no reason why we shouldn’t see the whole of creation out.’ Radregh nodded and then held up a hand, exclaiming, ‘Of course!’ All senses turned to him.

‘What is it?’ Kom hissed.

Radregh shook his great head as if waking from a dream.

‘But we’re time travellers. Why don’t we just go to the end of the universe, and see if the Institute of Time still stands?’ There were excited murmurs at this suggestion, but once again the Doctor was left frowning

‘What’s the matter?’ Hactrix asked, concerned. ‘You don’t seem to share our enthusiasm.’ The Doctor shook his head, straining to dredge up some long-forgotten memory.

‘It’s no good,’ he said with exasperation, ‘I can’t remember why.’

‘Why what!’ Hactrix responded.The Doctor smiled apologetically.

‘Okay, sorry, I’ll explain.There was a rule among the Time Lords

that we mustn't travel beyond a certain future time. I remember the rule and I remember the time, but I can't for the life of me remember why. Still, it would seem prudent for us to abide by this rule; I'm sure there must be a good reason for it.'

The disappointment was evident upon all those gathered there: it was as if a charge, which had hung in the air about them, had suddenly dispersed, run to earth. The Doctor however had not changed from his state of thoughtful introspection.

'There might be a way, though,' he said slowly, the idea not yet fully coalesced within his mind. The excitement returned to the group; all leaned forward to hear what he had to say. The Doctor suddenly grinned at them and winked.

'If I were to take the TARDIS to a moment *before* that time, then the natural passage of time would take me beyond it. I could see what was there without breaking the rule!'

Radregh clapped his hands.

'Bravo, Doctor! An excellent suggestion.'

'Will you do this?' Hactrix asked eagerly.'Will you make this journey and report back to us? There might be dangers: The Doctor continued to grin.

'There are always dangers.We are all, after all, travellers in time.We face dangers every day in our explorations.Yes, I'll do it and report back to you with my findings.This might form a fitting coda to my active explorations; who knows?'

At these words there were applause and other various species-specific signals of admiration, the Doctor acknowledging these with an inclination of his head.

'This is a fine inaugural adventure for our institute,' Hactrix exclaimed 'Go with our good wishes and return safely to us, your friends!'

With this final blessing received the Doctor waved and turned towards his TARDIS, standing on the rocky plain some ten yards away, surrounded by the vehicles of his companions. He stood for a moment in the doorway and turned back to look at his gathered friends, all still watching with anticipation. He waved once more then went inside.

The interior of the TARDIS was dark and vaulted, like some vast cathedral to technology, and as the Doctor walked across the marble floor his footfalls echoed back to him from a hundred different surfaces. He passed his comfortable chair and his bookshelves, passed within the stone pillars surrounding the main console until he stood before it, cast-iron supports looming over him gloomily He set the temporal coordinates to one second before that fateful forbidden date.With a flick of a single lever the central column began to rise and fall rhythmically, pushing the Doctor and his ship through time.

It did not take long before the column ceased its movement and the Doctor realised they had landed. He felt something of a sense of anticlimax; the journey had been so swift, nothing unexpected had happened. It hardly felt as if he was standing on the edge of unknown territory, moving into unknown time. He shook himself free of the mood and checked the environment outside the TARDIS. It was apparently safe enough, and so he decided to step outside and explore.

As the Doctor stepped from the TARDIS, the first thing he noticed was the air.While still perfectly breathable it seemed a little thinner than when he had left. He wondered if there might be some minor problems with the atmospheric generation plants; he would check later.

The next thing to strike the Doctor was the Institute of Time itself. It was, by and large, intact but was showing signs of wear and tear. Some of the artificial lights had failed and had not been replaced. Here and there he could see cracks in the walls and the odd broken pane of glass. Also he noticed something else, growing around the bases of many of the working lampposts. Plants huddled in these pools of light, plants of the type that grew in the underground

atmospheric-generation caverns. They should not have been allowed to spread to here; the institute was showing every sign of neglect.

The Doctor had by now begun to walk towards the buildings but suddenly froze in his tracks, looking upwards in horror. He cast his eyes about in all directions, searching the sky from horizon to horizon, but all was in vain.There was nothing to be seen; not a star, galaxy or nebula.Total blackness. For a moment he panicked, thinking the planet had wandered much closer to the black hole's event horizon over the intervening millennia. Then he calmed himself as he realised that if the planet were *that* close, it would have been pulled apart by the intolerable tidal forces long ago.This knowledge did nothing however to answer the fundamental question that was bothering him- what had happened here? He resolved to find an answer and to that end set off once more towards the complex.

The nearest laboratory was Radregh's, and so the Doctor entered, hoping to find his friend there. He passed down the entrance corridor, looking in at empty, dust-covered storerooms and offices on the way. Finally he pushed through the double doors at the end into the main lab.

The room was dark, the dim light from the corridor only illuminating a few metres of floor.The Doctor found a light switch and pushed it.A dim disc flickered on above the centre of the lab, offering its feeble illumination to the whole room. When the Doctor had last seen the lab it had been newly built and was as yet unused. Now it had clearly been utilised, old equipment had been replaced, new and unrecognisable experiments constructed; but all this must have happened a long time ago. Like the other rooms he had observed, everything was now covered in a thick layer of dust.

Then the Doctor noticed something beyond the main workbench, incongruous by its simplicity and its apparent lack of purpose. It was a short length of cord, hanging from the ceiling. At its end there was a tiny loop, maybe an inch and a half in diameter.

The Doctor walked around the edge of the workbench to get a

closer look, and almost stumbled over a small collection of objects on the floor. His foot had nudged against a large round sphere, and he immediately dropped to the floor to examine it more closely.The sphere was grey, and sat amongst a pile of thin tubes of various lengths and shapes, all of a similar colour. Something nagged at the back of the Doctor's mind, but he could not quite put the pieces together. He turned the sphere round in his hand and stared into empty eye sockets. In one moment of horror, those pieces came together in his mind to form the image of his friend Radregh. The skull, staring up at him with two black holes and a broad toothy grin had now, more than ever, the appearance of some Hallowe'en lantern: death's grim humour.Tears filled the Doctor's eyes. 'How?' he asked his dead friend. 'How did it come to this?'

Then another object caught the Doctor's eye. Beyond the pile of bones lay a stool, on its side where it had been kicked countless years before. The Doctor's eyes widened as the realisation struck him. Looking up once more at the cord and loop, he saw it now for what it was. It was a noose. Radregh had hung himself.

The question within the Doctor's mind was no longer how, but why. Why had his rational, sensible friend chosen to take his own life? It seemed so arbitrary, without reason; so unlike Radregh.

He gently placed his friend's skull back upon the floor and stood up. He steeled himself and set out for the next of his friends' research areas: Hactrix, the red crystal. There was an open-air path between the two laboratories, and it was this that the Doctor now took.

Partway along, as he passed beneath one of the overhanging lamps, he tripped. Looking down, he saw a plant had forced a large crack in the pavement and this had caught his foot. With an ancient Gallifreyan obscenity he cursed the lack of care given to the maintenance of his institute, but then realised that what was truly playing on his mind was fear over the fate of his friends. He hurried on, taking more care over both his footfalls and his outbursts.

Hactrix's section of the institute was an odd building. Externally it resembled nothing so much as a miniature mountain, while its corridors were like the channels formed by old magma flows. His

lab, however, showed another side to the crystal being. Even newly built he had already filled it with a variety of flora, being fascinated with organic life and in particular vegetation, perhaps because of its difference from his own manner of existence.

Now as the Doctor entered the still-lit lab he could see that at least this much of Hactrix had survived, his obsession having taken over much of his work area. Creepers ran everywhere, while the floor was thick with a multitude of different species of plant. As he walked through them he could feel a significant level of compost under his feet; these plants had clearly grown unchallenged for some time. He brushed vines aside as he made his way around the laboratory, looking for any sign of his old friend.

Then he saw a glint of red from a desk set against the rocky far wall.The flora grasped at every limb as he tore his way towards this hint of his friend's continued presence.

When he reached the desk his hopes were shattered. Shards of red crystal lay strewn across the desk. On either side of this area of destruction sat two speakers wired to a now-lifeless signal generator.The Doctor could not quite fathom what had gone on here. The signal generator had been running from a battery pack, but one which had no external power switch. He recognised it as a type that only responded to the thoughts of Hactrix. Clearly it had been allowed to run until drained. Desperate for answers the Doctor disconnected the signal generator from the now-dead cell and connected it instead to the mains supply, hoping that this like the lights still functioned. He was rewarded by a crackle from the speakers followed by a long, loud pure note.

It took a little time for the Doctor to register the significance of the sound. It was Hactrix's resonant frequency, the note with which he began any conversation. The sound continued and with it a realisation dawned within the Doctor's harrowed mind. Hactrix, like Radregh, had committed suicide. He had set up the equipment to cause his own crystal lattice to vibrate at its resonant frequency, the speakers driving this oscillation to ever greater amplitudes until ultimately he had been shaken apart; splintered.

The Doctor switched off the machine and stared at the remnants of his colleague. His head snapped up and he stared grimly into the distance momentarily before turning and pushing his way past the plants to leave the lab. He strode briskly down the corridors until they changed from the natural-looking tunnels into more conventional corridors.

He burst now into the workroom of the Hive and immediately saw the Perspex cube supported on its pedestal. He instantly knew something was amiss: it was terribly still. Running to it, the Doctor grabbed its sides in a desperate frenzy and stared wildly at the devastation within. Thousands of desiccated husks littered the floor of the cube.The Hive had been extinguished some time ago.

The Doctor cried out in anguish against the silent walls of the Institute. Would no one tell him why his friends were dead?

He noticed now small objects stuffed into every air hole of the Hive's container. They were small brown tubes, singed at one end. Looking down at the floor, the Doctor saw a small packet lying discarded there. He picked it up and brushed the dust from its surface. A blaze of red was revealed along with the legend 'Marlboro'. The Doctor stood amazed; the Hive had asphyxiated itself. He felt a pang of guilt as he realised that he must have left them in the institute himself, part of his own collection of artefacts; no one else here shared his passion for the planet of their origin.

The Doctor now dashed with ever increasing trepidation towards his next goal. As he entered Kom's research base he was struck by a blast of chill air. The air conditioning was turned up to full and as the Doctor had already suspected Kom's cold, still body lay upon the icy ground. With no internal means of regulating his body temperature, the gentle reptilian scientist had frozen to death. The Doctor fled, crashing through doors, heedless of anyone or anything. He held no hope now for any of his friends, but felt compelled to discover the fate of them all.

He bowled through the doors of Reesha's lab and was blinded by the light within. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the higher intensity illumination but when they finally did he cried

with joy at the sight before him. Reesha had not merely survived, but thrived! She now covered every surface of her laboratory, leaves and flowers as far as the eye could see, rampant vibrant growth.

'Reesha !' the Doctor cried.'What's happened? Why are the others dead?' There was no answer. Indeed nothing stirred amongst all this living vegetation. The Doctor bent down and gently stroked the nearest, beautiful flower.

'Reesha?'

The silence was appalling.The Doctor felt an urge to scream rise within him, anything rather than suffer this deathly stillness. The feeling passed to be replaced by memories of lively debates the Doctor and Reesha had together. Other recollections now sprang to mind; she had always been so fastidious about her pruning, never allowing her size to vary by more than a few centimetres. The Doctor recalled her explanation.

I were to cut myself back too far, she had whispered, Td not be able to maintain my energy levels and my thoughts would die away, starved Wood.'

But,' the Doctor had asked, 'why not allow yourself to grow larger? Surely this would allow you greater energy and greater scope for creative thought'

Reesha had shaken her flowers wildly, her kind of laughter

'Unfortunately not, my Doctor lf I allowed my body to grow too far beyond its current size my thoughts would become too diffuse and unconnected, spread too thin among my shoots.They would eventually lose all cohesion and my consciousness would fade and die, never to be recovered.'

The Doctor looked at the wild and uncontrolled life around him and realised he was looking at a grave. Other memories seemed stirred by Reesha's sprawling senility and death, but refused to reveal themselves to him.

He ran once more, searching but without purpose or direction, stumbling across still more bodies now unknown to him. Friends, no doubt, he had yet to make He wondered bitterly if it would not be better for them if they never met him, and guilt joined grief to sit heavily upon his mind.And in this dark mood the ultimate in morbidity overcame him. He dashed towards his own laboratory within the institute, fearing what he might discover - and yet in part feeling he would welcome the knowledge that place might bring, however terminal.

He threw back the doors and looked around. The bookshelves and benches were much as he had left them. One or two new trinkets were scattered here and there, but most were familiar to him On the far side of the room another of his high-backed leather armchairs was turned almost entirely away from him, facing towards the dead fireplace. His hearts skipped a beat. Barely visible he could just make out a figure's arm, resting upon the arm of the chair. It did not move and looked as dusty and ancient as everything else in this accursed place.

Slowly, gripped by fear, the Doctor crept towards the chair. He paused just behind it, his feet refusing to obey his mind.Then steeling himself for this final effort, he leapt around the seat to face its sepulchral occupant.

The Doctor's face, which had been wearing an expression of horror initially, now changed to one of surprise, followed by anger.

'You!' he cried indignantly.

The occupant of the chair looked up sharply and brushed the dust from his jacket. He smoothed his straight white hair, swept back from his temples.

'Yes, me; he said, 'or perhaps I should say, you.'

The Doctor ran his own hands over his wavy brown hair, unconsciously mimicking the actions of the man before him. 'What the hell are you doing here?' he asked accusingly.

Oh come now,' the first Doctor said gently admonishing himself, 'Where else would I be at this time?'

'Are you responsible for all this?' the Doctor asked gesturing around him with his hands.

The first Doctor smiled.

'Oh, I think we share whatever responsibility we have in equal measure: The Doctor gave a gasp of exasperation, frustrated by the first Doctor's elliptical responses. He decided to be more direct.

'Why are you here?' he asked bluntly.

'To remind myself of one or two things.'

'What happened to my friends?'

'Ah yes, your exciting new friends. I suppose they're not as exciting and new any more, hmm?'

'How can you be so callous!'The Doctor exploded. 'So careless of these people's lives. I've always hated you; you're so dispassionate.'

'Self-hatred?' the first Doctor responded. 'That can hardly be healthy. And when did I become so emotional? So unruly in my thoughts? Is this perhaps some form of senility? Dementia?'

'You're a fine one to talk of senility, you decrepit, dried-up old husk!' the Doctor responded savagely.

The first Doctor tutted.

'I'd hoped I'd never become so superficial.You know full well that *you* are the aged one.' The Doctor shook his head.

'You're sidetracking me. I want to know what happened to my friends. Tell me.' The first Doctor held up his hands.

‘Wait, be patient. Allow me to do what I came here to do, and all will become clear.’

The Doctor subsided and waited for his earlier incarnation to continue. ‘You remember, it seems, the rule forbidding travel beyond a certain point in time?’ The Doctor nodded.

‘Well,’ continued the first Doctor, ‘it seems, as I thought I might, that you’ve forgotten the reason for it’ The Doctor frowned but did not deny this.The first Doctor elaborated some more.

‘There are two very good reasons for this and both have contributed ultimately to the fates of your friends. The first reason should be obvious to you. Didn’t you look up before you came in?’

‘Yes:The Doctor responded cautiously.

‘And why do you think the sky is totally black and featureless?’

The Doctor thought for a moment before remembering his universal evolution.

‘The universe is in heat death.All the stars have become black holes or brown dwarfs, and the energy of the universe has become totally diffuse. In fact I’d guess that every system in the universe has become totally isolated from every other, each passing beyond the visible horizon of the others. Indeed, further in the future than here I guess even the remaining matter will break down into its most fundamental components.This is due to the continual expansion, yes?’

The first Doctor gave a subdued round of applause.

‘Well done. It’s nice to see my many regenerations haven’t rattled every piece of useful information out of your head’

‘Why, thank you,’ the Doctor responded sarcastically.

‘But you’ve obviously not considered the effect that this has had on the population of the universe. Firstly, and purely physically, it has

wiped out most races, killed as their suns died and robbed of anywhere to run'

'Well, yes,' the Doctor conceded, 'that is fairly obvious'

'I thought so,' the first Doctor agreed, 'but the second effect is more subtle as it is psychological. The effect of living on one planet, isolated from all others, is ultimately stifling.Those races clever enough to harness the power of black holes, as you did, still finally lacked stimulation. In the end their numbers dwindled as their drive to procreate waned, their impetus to continue removed. In effect all the races of the universe are committing suicide as we speak, if they have not done so already. By the way, didn't you wonder how I found this place?'

The Doctor was knocked off balance by this sudden change in tack. 'Er, well, yes.'

The first Doctor smiled in a way finely calculated to create maximum annoyance in the Doctor.

'Well, it was my idea, the Institute of Time. If I ever found the time this was where I was going to build it. So, no matter what else I might have forgotten, this seemed the most likely place to look - in the event I started irresponsibly bending the rules of time travel.'

The Doctor frowned with irritation.

'I don't remember ever being that much of a conformist:

The first Doctor raised an eyebrow.

'There's a difference between being a non-conformist and a reckless anarchist:

The Doctor dismissed the first Doctor's response with a wave of his hand.

'Enough of this. I still don't see how your explanation for the rest of the universe applies to my friends.They are all time travellers, after

all. While they might not be able usefully to travel conventionally through space at this point in time, there's no reason why they couldn't travel back, then laterally through space and forward to any temporal location.'

The first Doctor nodded.

'Quite true, but your friends always had an eye to the future. And this brings me to the second, and more fundamental reason you're not meant to travel past this point in time'

'Go on,' the Doctor said.

'If you go much further forward in time the expansion of the universe is such that the total energy of the universe is stretched to a critical point, the point of maximum entropy.At that point there is a slipping or shift in the speed of light - a decrease, in fact.'

The Doctor's eyes widened as he realised the implications of this.

'Which results in an enormous release of energy; another big bang! The creation of a whole new universe! A whole new realm to explore! Oh, and of course it allows for the faster light expansion in the first few moments. Very neat.'

The first Doctor did not respond for a few seconds, and simply studied the Doctor intently. Finally he spoke.

'And the destruction of this universe, much as the universe before this one died to create our own. Exceedingly neat. If you were to travel much further forward from this point you would cease to be, because space and time, the universe in which you exist, would cease to be.'

'But... ' the Doctor began.

'And this,' the first Doctor interrupted, 'is what your friends finally realised. A whole new universe was there to be explored - but by definition, they would always be apart from it. The rules governing the universe, governing space and time, are tied to the speed of

light through the background energy of the universe. If that changes, then those rules change. Any universe following these obsolete rules therefore ceases to exist, which would include, of course, any constituent part of it. That would also cover you and your friends. They were caught by this knowledge of their limitations, trapped in a depressive obsession with what they could not have. That is what drove them to end their lives as they could see no future ahead of them, no point to their continuation.'

The Doctor shook his head slowly, then sank to sit cross-legged on the floor, his forehead resting on his right hand.

'So this is it: the end. Nothing to look forward to. Worse than that, a glimpse, a vision of what might be that can never be realised.A whole new universe denied to me. Worse still, an infinity of universes denied to me. All that has gone before this universe of ours, all that will follow it, all is barred to me. I can see why my friends ended here; I understand them completely.'

The first Doctor rose from his chair, frowning, and stood over the Doctor.

'I realise you're upset over the deaths of your friends,' he said:But there is no reason at all why you should share their fate.'

The Doctor did not seem to be listening to him. He was lost in a state of hopelessness, much as his friends had been. 'Look at me!' the first Doctor snapped.

The Doctor's head lifted to meet his gaze.

'Your friends,' the first Doctor continued, 'for all that they were time travellers, were linear in their thoughts, pedestrian.This is the real reason I'm here: to remind you how to live.'

'To show me how much better I am than them?' the Doctor snarled bitterly.

For the first time the first Doctor seemed to soften his demeanour. When he answered it was almost apologetic.

‘I didn’t mean to sound so condescending or judgemental over your friends. However, there is something different to our nature, something that should be obvious, even innate to our way of thinking.’

He paused, ensuring he had the Doctor’s full attention before continuing.

‘Your friends perceived time as a line, running from past to present and then to the future.They tied their lives to that line like sailors adrift in an ocean, tied to a broken mast. Once they saw how the line ended, they perceived this naturally as the end of their lives also. But that is not how we exist, you and I. How arrogant of your friends to assume that simply because they had seen the demise of the universe, they understood it in its totality! Why, we could journey throughout its temporal and spatial borders for a billion years, and still our experiences would be insignificant when compared with what remained undiscovered. Our timeline, your timeline, your future stretches before you with an infinity of possibilities. We wander back and forth in time and space while our life heads ever onwards.Your personal timeline is the reason for our existence, and it will continue for as long as you have the stomach for new experiences, and new adventures:

The Doctor rose to his feet and studied his earlier self. He wondered then whether age truly brought wisdom or if, at least in his case, it simply eroded it. He reached out his left hand to grasp the first Doctor’s shoulder.

‘Thank you; he said, tired but resolute, ‘for reminding me: The first Doctor smiled once again.

Any time:

The five time travellers had watched the TARDIS wink out of existence only a moment earlier. Now with a familiar pulsing whine, it reappeared in exactly the same spot. They rushed over to meet the Doctor as he stepped from the machine, all clamouring for attention.The Doctor patted the air in front of him, trying to restore

some semblance of calm.

‘Did you do it? Did you make it beyond the forbidden time?’ Radregh asked with uncharacteristic excitement. The Doctor saw he was not going to be able to say nothing and so replied, ‘Yes, yes I did:

‘Well?’ asked Hactrix.

‘Well what?’ the Doctor responded innocently.

‘Will the Institute of Time, will we all, last to the end of time?’

The Doctor covered any sadness he might have felt with a careless, dismissive manner.

‘Oh come on, you don’t want me to tell you everything right now, do you?’

The frustration was evident from each of his friends, but their attitudes also remained good-natured towards him After all; he said, looking at each of them in turn. ‘We have all the time in the world:

The Age of Ambition
Andy Campbell

I

I shall not go back to 1866 again.

There is so much I wish to relate, but already I pause; the nib of my quill pen hovers irresolutely over the page. I read my first sentence over and over again, as the ink gradually ceases to glisten and the words dry to permanence. How odd those words appear, written in my own hand! For I was ever the most conservative and sentimental of girls; I always disliked change. Even Miss Mary, my favourite doll in childhood, I was hesitant to put aside as I grew too old for such playthings; Miss Mary represented a stability and predictability of life that I was reluctant to relinquish. In the end I surrendered her in response to my father's gentle admonition: 'You're a grown-up lady now, Victoria.' As I once gave up my doll, so now I give up my whole life, my home, and the era of my birth: 'the Victorian era', as posterity will term it. I have seen and heard things that make it impossible for me ever to return: sights and sounds that have changed me to the heart. I have experienced a crisis of faith in the wisdom of my elders that has left me with no choice but to turn my back on my beginnings; perhaps that is the meaning of adulthood. I shall not go back again.

The business that has finally brought me to this drastic decision had its beginning, as far as I am concerned, with a remarkable discussion between my dear father, Professor Edward Waterfield, and Sir Charles Westbrooke - the renowned researcher into human physiology and author of that important work, *Principles of Human Anatomy,* published in four volumes in 1861.

On the evening of the third day of September in the year of grace 1864, Papa and I were invited for dinner at Westbrooke's fine Georgian home in Canterbury. Since Mama's untimely death the previous autumn, Papa's many friends from the English scientific community had rallied impressively to our support. Though

relations between my father and Westbrooke perhaps stood closer to acquaintanceship than to true friendship, I believe we both numbered him among those who had helped to mitigate our bereavement with his lively company and wide. ranging conversation; and to Westbrooke's sympathy for our loss had been added empathy, for his own wife Claire had recently died in a most tragic manner, murdered by ruffians who had broken into his house with larcenous intent.

On this particular evening we were seated together in Westbrooke's vast high-ceilinged drawing room, the opulence of which I found rather oppressive.The walls were papered blood red, and vast dark oil paintings depicting military scenes were mounted upon them.The thick carpet was pale brown, bearing an infinitely complex swirling pattern of leaf-like structures: the sort of design Aunt Margaret always accuses of causing her a headache. The armchairs were enormous, and covered in dark leather. Above the fireplace hung a large mirror with an elaborate gilt frame. I recalled that Westbrooke, who had been something of a big-game hunter in his youth, had once indicated that he would have preferred a stag's head mounted above his fireplace; but Claire had apparently expressed distaste at the idea of having 'horrible dead things in the house', and Westbrooke had deferred to her in the matter.

Dinner was over, and Westbrooke was embarked on a singular exposition that was evidently directed toward my father only. Papa listened earnestly, his pince-nez perched in a scholarly fashion near the end of his nose. He knew that he could always learn something from Westbrooke. Meanwhile I sat quietly in a corner of the drawing room, making slow but steady progress in my needlework, listening to Westbrooke and wondering (as I often did in such circumstances) whether the two men realised how closely I was attending to what was being said.

'Very early one morning,' Westbrooke said, 'about a week after my beloved Claire's death, I emerged from a remarkably vivid dream, in which I had beheld my wife so clearly that I woke with tears upon my face. Curiously, in my dream, Claire appeared not as herself but as Desdemona, the heroine of Shakespeare's *Othello.As* I stirred to full wakefulness, the significance of the dream gradually

became apparent to me. As a young girl in college, Claire had once told me, she had played the role of Desdemona in an amateur dramatic production. She had described with a kind of bashful pride the enormous effort she had expended in memorising her lines, an effort so single-minded and ultimately efficacious that even years later she could recall without fault or hesitation every word the Bard had given his heroine to utter.

'As I lay there alone in our nuptial bed, I began to ask myself with nothing less than a thrill of panic: what had *become* of her awareness of those lines when she died? Where had they gone? A hundred hours of study and practice to absorb them, and in an instant they had vanished into the ether. In that moment it was borne upon me what a thorough nonsense is death, what a stupid futile undoing of the long arduous process of filling one's mind and forming one's character.A scholar arrives at his deathbed after a lifetime of study: his erudition is irretrievably lost in a moment. A soldier forges his spirit in a score of campaigns on the battlefield: where goes his bravery in the final moment as the bullet enters his brain? And what becomes of the poet's acquired sensitivity to Nature, when Nature herself sees fit to end him?' 'This is a mystery,' Papa said meditatively; then looked embarrassed, no doubt sensing that his remark would seem a platitude.

'My studies of anatomy have not helped,' Westbrooke continued. 'After twenty-five years of research, I think I can say that I understand human biology as well as any man alive. Yet when death is understood in a physiological sense, it appears not less but *more* ridiculous.The heart stops, the blood cools, the mind fades into oblivion - and then the undignified and foul process of necrosis, the degeneration of flesh and organs, all the cells unravelling at once, and the result too disgusting to look upon:

I paused in my sewing. My needle, almost motionless, but trembling very slightly between my fingers, glinted in the candlelight. By now I felt sure that both my father and Westbrooke were so engrossed in what the latter was saying that they had temporarily lost consciousness of my presence; certainly, had they not, they would never have discussed such gruesome matters in the presence of a young woman

‘You see,’ Westbrooke explained, ‘I was taught from childhood that death is the most natural of phenomena, only to be expected, and hence not to be feared. On the morning of my dream I perceived that it is, on the contrary, the *least* natural of all possible events. It followed to my mind that death should be avoidable, treatable, like any other pointless piece of human suffering, if only we are willing to put aside our preconceptions and *think.’*

I looked up and saw that my father’s face expressed disquiet at this speculative turn in Westbrooke’s argument; for Westbrooke, as well as a thorough and disciplined scholar, was known as something of an iconoclast, a radical thinker and perhaps, in some ill-defined way, a dangerous one. ‘What are you driving at, Charles?’ he asked.

Westbrooke did not answer the question directly. Instead he asked: ‘I assume you have read Mr Darwin’s *Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection?’*

‘Of course,’ Papa replied. ‘What serious scientist has not read it, and who has not entered into the debate it has inspired?’

‘Quite so. One has to admire Mr Darwin’s moral courage. But the implications of his theory have not yet been fully worked out. He argues that all living things, including ourselves, are in continuous competition for limited resources, does he not? And in a fundamentally hostile world, those organisms that possess characteristics conferring better chances of survival will live longer, and have more offspring, which in turn inherit those characteristics. It follows that natural selection, as Mr Darwin terms it, operates only on the young - those who are still able or likely to have children. By the time we arrive at old age, some of us will have reproduced and others will not, but evolution has nothing further to say about what happens to our bodies, and will not mitigate the ravages of old age. So we decline and die - but where is the natural law that decrees that we must?’

“Tis common, all that lives must die; said my father cryptically beg your pardon?’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said self-consciously. ‘Queen Gertrude to Hamlet. You reminded me earlier of Shakespeare:

‘And you in turn remind me of my dear Claire; said Westbrooke with a sad smile:Such a loss as ours is hard to support, is it not, Edward? I know that your Edith is never far from your thoughts.’

‘No, indeed; agreed Papa.

‘Such a great loss; Westbrooke said. ‘Pneumonia, was it not? A cruel illness.And at such a tender age - thirty-six?’ ‘Thirty-seven:

I had lost interest in my needlework; I let the piece of fabric sink down onto my lap. In my mind I was seeing Mama’s face, just as I always pictured it: patient and serene, the face of an angel, with just a few little telling signs of tiredness around the eyes.

‘Forgive my touching upon it, Edward; said Westbrooke:but I know you appreciate frank speech. In addition to your profound grief at Edith’s death, were you not touched by its - futility? Increasingly, as I think of Claire, the *profound pointlessness* of losing her is the thing that affects me most. Dying should be reversible:

It is not,’ Papa replied with resignation, and he settled back in his armchair. ‘Why not?’Westbrooke asked.

My father’s eyes, which for some while had been focusing absently on the contents of his brandy glass, now looked up sharply to meet Westbrooke’s stare.’Resurrection of the dead would be an outrage against common sense; my father said.

‘What common sense?’

‘Charles, I have to ask - is all this seriously meant?’

Westbrooke got to his feet and strolled across to the mirror above his fireplace, where he stood gazing meditatively at his own reflection for a few moments before turning back to address my father. think I might be able to do it, Edward; he said.

‘Impossible!’ was my father’s response.

Westbrooke smiled, and in the flickering candlelight his smile appeared to me slightly dangerous:You are quite right, Edward; he replied without resentment. It *is* impossible. But here we encounter an important stumbling block to many an intelligent person’s thinking. Merely knowing that something is impossible should never deter one from doing it. You know as well as I do, Edward, that until 1609 it was impossible to observe the surface of another planet; until 1776 it was impossible to pilot a vehicle beneath the sea; until 1847 it was impossible to perform surgery without inflicting the most terrible pain; and of course there are endless further examples. The most casual student of history can confirm that impossibility is merely a matter of dates. How our descendants will marvel at our nineteenth-century narrow-mindedness, with our defeatist assumption that death is irreversible! Just as we look back upon our ancestors of the Middle Ages, and view them with a mixture of pity and contempt for their belief, now so obviously mistaken, that the world is flat’

‘I *know* that death is irreversible,’ Papa insisted.

Here Westbrooke became more animated. ‘Yes of course you do, my friend.You know it in your heart, in your mind, in the very depths of your being.And in just the same way, and with equal conviction, our forefathers of five hundred years ago *knew* that the world was a flat disc, with the heavens rotating around it. They knew it because they had been told it from birth, and had been exposed to no other idea’

‘Only the Lord can give life,’ said Papa. ‘And certainly none other than the Lord could restore it’

‘Some are already arguing that Mr Darwin’s work renders the Lord unnecessary,’ countered Westbrooke. I saw that my father looked unhappy at this, but Westbrooke continued undaunted. ‘And even if God were all that He is assumed to be, why would He give us such extensive creative faculties if we were not intended to exploit them fully? The human brain is Nature’s crowning marvel, Edward. Whether it has evolved or was divinely conceived is a matter for

debate, but probably irrelevant. In either case, do you suppose for one moment that the brain's functions do not extend beyond designing a few simple mechanical contraptions or perfecting a handful of vaccines? No, the human intellect is equal to grander challenges. I believe this century will change things in undreamed of ways. Death's days are numbered, my friend'

'Very well, Charles,' said my father cautiously. 'In *practical* terms - how is it to be done?'

'I have begun to conduct simple experiments into this matter,' said Westbrooke, 'and I have already obtained some interesting results. For example, one of my lines of inquiry concerned the grafting of a modified Connaughton steam-pump into the left ventricle of the heart in certain mammals that had been deliberately euthanised. Believe me, I confirmed beyond any possibility of doubt that the animals had truly died; but later, with the circulatory system thus artificially fortified, they were not only restored to activity, but in addition proved - shall we say -'

Here Westbrooke faltered uncharacteristically; perhaps he had remembered my presence and was concerned not to upset me, after all. 'Proved what?' asked Papa.

The animals proved remarkably difficult to kill for a second time.'

'I must say I disapprove of such work,' Papa said reproachfully. 'How exactly did you attempt to kill these unfortunate creatures - the second time?'

My needlework was quite forgotten; I felt hypnotised as I watched Westbrooke's eyes gleaming in the candlelight. 'I tried almost everything I could think of, Edward,' he said. 'It was not to be accomplished. In fact, I am beginning to believe that death itself may be merely a consequence of the failure of inherently inefficient physiological processes. An imperfectly designed machine will inevitably break down sooner or later. A perfectly designed machine should run indefinitely, because there will never be any *specific* reason for it to stop.'

Westbrooke paused to pour more brandy for my father and for himself from his cut-glass decanter.

‘Consider human blood, for example,’ he said. ‘I have been conducting research into the cardiovascular system for a good many years, and as you know, I contributed substantially to Dr Halsey’s famous volumes on haematology. By far the most remarkable feature of blood is its degree of impurity - even the blood of a newborn child. If we in our chemical laboratories were set the task of developing blood for the first time, in order to perform the functions that we now know it has, we would certainly mix the constituent chemicals in very different proportions from those actually observed.’

Papa was incredulous. ‘Blood could be - better?’ he asked.

‘Oh yes,’ replied Westbrooke. ‘Much better. I have established it beyond doubt.And that is just the beginning.’ Papa rose to his feet. ‘I wish to hear no more, Charles,’ he said. The line of thought you are propounding is too gruesome to pursue.’

Westbrooke smiled indulgently. ‘My dear Edward! In a moment you will surely mention *Frankenstein.* We have all been engrossed by that particular romance, have we not? And delighted in the fecundity of Mrs Shelley’s imagination? But why should there be anything inherently gruesome about returning from death to life? On the contrary, what could be more beautiful or dignified than overcoming the ultimate enemy and returning in triumph to one’s loved ones? In death and decay lies all that is squalid and ugly. We should not allow our sensibilities, much less our fear, to cause us to shrink from the possibility of overcoming these things’

My father, who had begun pacing the floor, returned to his seat. For almost a minute he gazed into Westbrooke’s eyes, as if searching there for a flicker of self-doubt. For Papa knew what I did not then fully appreciate, that Westbrooke was a genius; and he was no doubt reasoning that if the man was wholly convinced of what he was saying, we should consider accepting it also.

‘Is it possible, Charles?’ my father whispered at last.

‘You’ll see, my friend,’ said Westbrooke. ‘It will be beautiful:And in that moment the candle closest to Westbrooke, the one illuminating his face, abruptly went out.

II

The matter rested there. In fact, we saw very little of Westbrooke after that evening; he began to retreat into seclusion, showing diminishing interest in any kind of social intercourse, and it was noticed that he ceased to write for the various scientific journals to which he had formerly been a prolific contributor. He also apparently decided that he could do without servants; and there was, I recall, something of a minor scandal in Canterbury due to the local people's perception that he had dismissed his staff without good reason.

Within two years my own life had changed irreversibly: my beloved father had died in a manner that I could not have imagined in 1864; but I acquired two remarkable friends, who each day challenge the limits of what I consider possible. My recent experiences seem to me like remembered dreams, yet each of them truly happened.The Doctor, Jamie McCrimmon and I stood together in that nightmare city of thinking machines; there Papa sacrificed his life confronting demons of which mankind has not yet dreamt. Soon afterward, in the heart of a bleak and ashen desert, we penetrated a tomb that was but a trap for the intelligent; this time the fiends were of a different form, but no less fearful for their closer kinship with ourselves.

The Doctor has told me that we three occupy a special place in the scheme of Creation, and I believe him. Cautiously, like a liberated slave who stretches unshackled limbs for the first time, I grow accustomed to the idea that the TARDIS can travel anywhere without restriction. Yet I must confess (as the flying machine is incorrigibly unreliable, by its pilot's own confession) that I had considered it more likely that I should set foot on the sun than that I should simply return home. The Doctor, however, in the casual manner in which he habitually dispenses great truths, assures me that all possible events will occur sooner or later, if one is willing to wait long enough.

So it was that on the evening of the fifth of June in the year 1866 (I

was to discover the precise date later), we set down in the gardens of Westbrooke's house. As on our previous journeys, I did not feel as if we were the ones arriving; on the contrary, as we stood together in the ship's pale-coloured control room I felt as if a fresh environment were materialising around us, while we stayed still. The Doctor activated the screen by which we would be able to observe our new surroundings. I beheld the extensive gardens surrounding Westbrooke's home, the flowers and trees shining in monochrome beneath a full moon, and I realised I was back in the England I knew.

'It's home; I said disbelievingly. 'I'm home.'

On the screen, the house itself could be partially glimpsed through the interlacing foliage of vast dark elms that moved slightly in a steady breeze. It was just as I recalled it, an enduring testimony to Westbrooke's considerable wealth: an enormous three-storied mansion in red brick, with courses and cornices of white stone, and trimmings of white-painted woodwork. Part of the top floor appeared curiously illumined, and within moments I sensed that something was wrong.

'Oh dear,' said the Doctor, as if in confirmation of my fears. He was studying the screen, a diminutive black-clad figure, his hands wringing together nervously.

Jamie moved to the Doctor's side. 'What's that light in the upstairs, Doctor?'

'I believe there's a fire; said the Doctor. 'Oh dear, dear me, how very careless.'

'I know this place,' I told them. 'It belongs to a friend of my father. A distinguished scientist - Sir Charles Westbrooke:

The Doctor turned to me. 'Really, Victoria? How very interesting. Well then -' with a vigorous clap of his hands - 'we'd better hurry and see what the problem is, hadn't we?' And he operated the lever that opened the door of the ship.

‘We must help him, Doctor,’ I said. ‘He’s a good man - a great man But he suffered terribly when his wife died, and I think that with no one to look after him, he may not be - he may not be very well:

‘Here we go again; said Jamie ruefully. ‘The TARDIS never arrives anywhere there *isn’t* a problem, does it Doctor?’ While Jamie said this he was watching me, not the Doctor. It was a rhetorical question, intended by the Highlander as part of my education.

‘Well, that’s synchronicity, you see, Jamie; explained the Doctor perfunctorily, rubbing his hands together and advancing toward the TARDIS doors as they swung open with a low hum.

‘Oh aye, synchro... aye; Jamie replied.We moved out of the TARDIS and onto a wide lawn, its grass bleached to a silvery grey by the bright moonlight. The flying machine had materialised near an ornate sundial. Despite the lateness of the hour, the breeze that ruffled our clothes was warm. It was now beyond doubt that the glowing light filling several of the building’s upper windows was the result of a blaze inside.The Doctor strode off purposefully toward the house, Jamie and me hurrying to keep up with him

On the way I briefly detailed Westbrooke’s distinguished career in medicine, and hinted at the strange dark changes that had come over his thinking after the tragic loss of his wife.The Doctor shook his head sadly at my brief account of Claire’s murder. Jamie, too, was grim-faced; he was a man of war, but the notion of murdering a woman disgusted him

‘I haven’t seen Westbrooke since 1864,’ I concluded as we reached the house. ‘But I remember that he dismissed all his servants. No one knew why.’

An imposing flight of steps, flanked by stone columns, led up to the main entrance of the house.The door was made of solid oak, and securely locked. I was on the point of suggesting the servants’ entrance, but in a moment the Doctor had produced a twisted stick of metal from one of his many pockets and expertly picked the lock. He pushed the heavy door open, and as it swung back we moved cautiously into the vast entrance hall.

The hallway was richly carpeted and flanked by ornamental suits of armour. Each of the suits grasped some outsized and hideous weapon, which Jamie noted with interest.A remarkable collection of firearms was displayed on the walls, in many mounted glass cases. Both sides of the hall were lined with panelled doors, each door concealing a passage into a different part of the house. Papa had once described Westbrooke's home as labyrinthine'; at the time I had smiled at this portentous description, but it seemed to me to have ominous overtones now. An acrid smell of smoke floated in the hallway, calling to my mind vague associations with Guy Fawkes Night. A faint hissing sound came from the fire burning somewhere upstairs in the building.

'Is anybody at home?' the Doctor called cheerily. His voice echoed around the hall and up the principal stairway.

'We should see where the fire is, Doctor,' said Jamie, making for the stairway; but the Doctor placed a restraining hand on his arm.

'No, Jamie, not yet. I'd like to find the owner - Mr -' He looked at me enquiringly.

Westbrooke; I reminded him.

'Yes, I'd like to find Mr Westbrooke first and make sure he's safe. We'll deal with the fire in a moment. You said he lives alone, Victoria? Most unusual in a house of this size.'

'He wasn't always reclusive, Doctor. He was a brilliant man.At one time everyone in the English scientific community knew him.'

'Really?' asked the Doctor. He was gazing around the entrance hall, hands clasped together, and listening attentively. After a moment he appeared to hear some small sound - this was impressive, over the pervasive hiss of flames, and certainly neither Jamie nor I heard anything - and he hurried through one of the doorways on the left side of the entrance hall, while we trailed behind him

We passed through into an oak-panelled lobby. Here the Doctor

pushed open the second door on the right, and together we entered what appeared to be a commodious and well-appointed study. My eyes were drawn at once to the large and beautiful oil painting of Claire Westbrooke that hung on the wall, so completely dominating the room that it seized my attention before the presence of Westbrooke himself, crouching like a cornered animal behind his leather-topped writing desk. He was as immobile as his wife's image in the painting: as immaculately dressed as I remembered him, and clean-shaven; but gaunt of countenance, with eyes that appeared terrified.

'Mr Westbrooke?' enquired the Doctor. Westbrooke, rising slowly to his feet, looked straight past him and at me with an expression of dawning recognition. 'Victoria?' he croaked. His voice seemed to have atrophied through lack of use. 'My dear Victoria Maud?'

'Sir Charles!' I ran to him and grasped both his hands, which were cold despite the warmth of the evening. 'Sir Charles, what on earth are you doing in here? A fire burns upstairs!'

'You mustn't concern yourself, my dear,' Westbrooke said shakily. 'The fire will not matter.'

'Ach, now listen!' cried Jamie, stepping forward. 'We should do something about it before the whole place burns down!'

'Yes, quite right,' agreed the Doctor. 'Now, some kind of extinguishing apparatus -'

Westbrooke registered my companions' presence for the first time. 'Who are these people, Victoria? Where is your father?'

I introduced the Doctor and Jamie, leaving Westbrooke's second question unanswered. Then I repeated my own question: 'What are you doing in here, Sir Charles?'

'They are hard to avoid,' was his reply.

'Who are?' asked the Doctor.

‘They weren’t expecting to come back,’Westbrooke said.’Now that they have returned, they are much more aggressive than I anticipated.’

‘Who?’ asked Jamie, without the Doctor’s patient tone.

‘One of them overturned a candelabrum upstairs in the west wing,’ Westbrooke said hoarsely.’It wasn’t intentional: I don’t believe their thinking is so sophisticated. You mustn’t concern yourself with the fire; perhaps it will burn itself out.And if it does not, perhaps that would be better.’

The Doctor placed a reassuring hand on Westbrooke’s shoulder. Westbrooke did not object; indeed, he seemed not to notice the gesture. ‘My dear fellow,’ the Doctor said. ‘Naturally your fire is your own business. But I do feel we should get you out of here; wouldn’t you agree?’

‘Aye,’ said Jamie. ‘We should go - it’s no’ safe here’

Westbrooke shook his head vigorously. ‘They’ll find me if I leave,’ he said. ‘They could be anywhere in the house by now.’ And I recalled the conversation that Westbrooke had had with Papa on that September evening in 1864.

‘You succeeded,’ I said. ‘Didn’t you, Sir Charles?’ The Doctor and Jamie both looked at me in bewilderment. In my hurried account of Westbrooke as we headed toward the house I had not recounted the details of his radical beliefs, nor made any reference to his stated intention to vindicate them experimentally.

‘In the end, a slight change to the formula for the blood substitute was all that was required,’ said Westbrooke, addressing only me. ‘It was ludicrously simple - a schoolboy might have thought of it. Electrically fortified erythrocytes in synthetic liquid medium. That was the modification waiting to be discovered through two years of research. Tonight I administered it to all my experimental subjects at once. I had had so many disappointments that I didn’t even expect it to work. But now -’

‘Experimental subjects?’ enquired the Doctor.

“The animals you talked about?’ I asked. ‘Mammals, you told us.’ By this point, that was what I was earnestly hoping for. But two years of research are a long time to a man of Westbrooke’s energy and self-discipline; I knew that he had already achieved partial successes with animals; and even before he shook his head gravely, I knew perfectly well that his researches would by now have advanced beyond the stage of experimentation on non-human subjects.

‘What are you talking about?’ Jamie asked Westbrooke exasperatedly. The expression on the Doctor’s face indicated that he already knew.’Oh dear,’ he said.

‘They weren’t expecting to come back,’ Westbrooke repeated forlornly. ‘How many of them are there?’ asked the Doctor grimly.

‘Six,’ Westbrooke replied. ‘Five men and one - one woman All the previous subjects I disposed of when necrosis could no longer be postponed.’

‘Jamie. Victoria. Mr Westbrooke,’ said the Doctor resolutely ‘I think we should leave this room now, and address this problem without delay.’

Westbrooke was still in a state of shock, but his courage seemed somewhat bolstered by our company. I like to believe that his familiarity with me, a figure from a time when his life was still safe and predictable, heartened him at least as much as Jamie’s formidable brawn or the Doctor’s air of understated authority. Jamie and the Doctor each took one of Westbrooke’s arms, and thus supported he submitted to being led from the study, albeit in a state of trembling fear. We passed back through the lobby, an uncertain and anxious group of four, into the main hall, where the distant sound of burning could still be clearly heard.

‘We can leave now, can’t we Doctor?’ asked Jamie as we entered the hall. ‘Get Westbrooke to somewhere safe?’

It's rarely that simple jamie; said the Doctor grimly. His eyes were fixed on the far end of the long hall We followed his gaze, and I perceived an indistinct shape moving in the shadows between two of Westbrooke's ornamental suits of armour. Little could be seen of the figure at this range and in such gloom, but I was suddenly gripped by a powerful desire not to view it more closely. The man had not noticed our presence, and was apparently occupied in pushing himself without much force against one of Westbrooke's suits of armour. He presented a curious spectacle: the image of a man who has somehow forgotten that one cannot pass through solid objects but must walk around them. Inevitably, after a few moments, the suit of armour toppled over with a gigantic metallic crash, sending pieces of itself clattering across the hallway. The sudden noise elicited an inarticulate cry of terror from Westbrooke, who turned and fled, disappearing through one of the doorways leading to the east wing of the house.

No; whispered Jamie, his eyes fixed upon the dark figure as it shambled aimlessly among the fallen ruins of the armour. 'This is nae right. Doctor, I swear he's not -'

With a heart-stopping crash, a door immediately to my right burst open and a bulky figure came lurching out of the doorway toward me. It was a man, obscenely fat, wearing a dishevelled suit and some form of novelty mask.As a little girl I had once seen a line of such masks on sale for All Souls' Eve in an amusement emporium in Eastbourne; some represented witches, some trolls, some goblins; and they frightened the little children very effectively.The mask that this man was wearing seemed to be an especially gruesome example of its kind: pale green, with a loathsome fixed grin that appeared to result from the lips being too desiccated and immobile to cover the teeth. I caught a strong whiff of something that could only be formaldehyde, and realised that the man was not wearing a mask at all.

My scream must have been ear-splitting. Heedless of my companions, I fled the length of the hall and shouldered my way through a door into the carpeted passageway beyond; whether or not I was following in Westbrooke's footsteps I was too panicked to know or care. Soon I was tripping down a dusty stone stairway

illuminated only by one of the mounted brass oil lamps that Westbrooke appeared to keep lit throughout the house. Cobwebs clung to my face. I fell against the rough wooden door at the bottom of the stairway and pushed through it into the gloom beyond, my heart hammering in my chest.

I glanced around, panting, in the semi-darkness. A little light emanated from two more of the mounted oil lamps. I had entered Westbrooke's wine cellar: a large example of its kind, containing many tall wooden racks laden with dusty bottles, and everywhere thickly festooned in cobwebs. Presently I perceived that something was stirring behind one of the wooden cabinets, producing a restless shuffling sound; and then I heard a voice, speaking as through a mouthful of dirt, announce meaninglessly: 'You have been a wonderful wife, my dear.'

A figure shambled slowly from concealment, revealing itself in the half-light as a stooping, elderly man dressed in dirty- looking brown garments. It was immediately evident that, like the two creatures upstairs in the hallway, he was no longer a living person. His skin was grey and desiccated, and his eyes, lacking the lubricant to swivel them, stared unblinkingly ahead. The stench of preservative chemicals that arose from his body defies description.

I now realise it is quite true that one hears one's own heartbeat when gripped by the extremity of fear. As I backed away from the advancing figure, my breath seemed frozen in my lungs. With part of my mind I appreciated well enough that all

I had to do was to retreat through the door by which I had entered; but, gripped by horror at the sight of Westbrooke's resurrected creature, I behaved irrationally, and moved instead toward the rear of the wine cellar, so that soon the old man stood between myself and my only exit.

'You have been a wonderful wife, my dear,' he said again, apparently addressing me; and I realised with a cold thrill of horror that he was simply repeating mindlessly, without sense or purpose, the only remnant of human thought that still resided in his decaying brain: his final words in life. A picture of the old man's

dying moment flashed unbidden into my mind with the clarity of a daguerreotype: he would have lain upon his deathbed (in hospital rather than in his home, I felt sure), feeling no pain but only an overwhelming tiredness, and bade his wife a loving farewell before departing her company for what both would have considered the final time: *You have been a wonderful wife, my dear.* But he was back now

My terror was made perfect by the old man's evident hostility, in contrast to the tenderness of his words. Now he was advancing more rapidly, his arms outstretched to grasp me. I shrieked at the top of my lungs, surprising myself with the power and pitch of the cry; and his right hand pressed over my mouth, as hard and cold as a slab of refrigerated meat. My attempts to thrust him away were wholly futile; he was functioning as a machine, an engine of cold flesh, and he was dreadfully strong. I closed my eyes above his probing, reeking fingers.

'You have been a won -' the old man slurred, and his hand dropped away from my face. I opened my eyes and squinted at him. Something had happened to his throat: specifically, a broad piece of metal now projected from it. I peered at the metal object and perceived that it was the tip of a heavy sword, which had stopped an inch short of transfixing me as well.

The metal tip shifted, and brown blood burst free of the old man's neck and sprayed across my face, as cold as pond water. The old man slumped heavily to the stone floor of the cellar, wrenching the blade down with him; but Jamie still held on to the sword's handle. I fell into his arms.

'Victoria!' he cried. We stumbled away from the twitching corpse.

'Oh Jamie,' I gasped against his shoulder. 'I didn't like that at all!'

Jamie pulled the sword free of the body:Aye, he's a mean-looking beggar right enough. Good job your Mr Westbrooke likes his suits of armour, eh?' He brandished the huge sword gracefully in spite of its enormous weight. 'It's a claymore, Victoria! I saw some blood spilt on Culloden's field with one o' these!'

As we moved together toward the door of the wine cellar, we heard a shuffling noise behind us, and turned to see the old man rising to his feet.

'Ye're a persistent divell, aren't ye?' Jamie exclaimed. He took a resolute pace towards the creature and hefted the sword, then with a powerful twisting motion swept its head cleanly from its body. I screamed as the severed head tumbled to the floor.The body slumped after it. I turned and dragged open the door of the wine cellar.

I realised that Jamie was not following. 'Look!' he yelled. I looked, and watched the headless body rise unsteadily to its feet.

'Jamie, we have to go!' I cried. 'Now!'

But Jamie appeared hypnotised by the unreality of what he was seeing. Without doubt he was accustomed to violence, but not of this kind. 'It's no' possible,' he murmured.

'Jamie, there's no time! We must get out of here and back to the Doctor *now!'*

With a wordless yell Jamie attacked the corpse. He slammed the sword into it again and again, lopping it to pieces. Soon gory fragments littered the floor; but still they writhed and turned.

'He won't die,' Jamie said quietly.

'Jamie, the door's open! We must go!'

But now the young Highlander had something new to stare at, as did I. The pieces of the body were no longer moving randomly; they were writhing toward each other, as if attempting to reconstitute the human figure they had formerly composed. Failing in this, they were meeting and resealing in haphazard combinations: the joint of one shoulder fastened itself to the stump of the neck; a forearm sealed itself against a ragged wound in the torso. Within less than a minute the body had reassembled itself into an entirely new shape

and struggled up from the floor, a dripping amalgam of fused human pieces, its four limbs thrashing in an uncoordinated fashion as it lurched toward us.

‘Ye’re right,Victoria; Jamie said.The claymore slipped from his relaxing grip and clattered to the floor. ‘We’re leaving’

As we hurried back up the stairs, I breathlessly thanked Jamie for saving my life. It is a curious feeling to be so comprehensively indebted to another person; perhaps I should try to get used to it. We lost our way in our attempt to relocate the main hall, finding ourselves instead in Westbrooke’s long oak-panelled dining room; but to our great relief we found the Doctor already there.

He scratched his head vigorously, ruffling his unruly mop of hair. ‘Six of them,’ he said to himself. Not an army, but - a distinct problem. Yes, a serious problem. Six of them somewhere in the house...’

‘Well, Doctor,’ said Jamie. ‘You always have good ideas. What do we do now?’

The door at the opposite end of the dining room sprang open with a dull bang, and Westbrooke came stumbling backwards into the room. His hands were raised in front of his face, but tremblingly and without conviction, as if he were facing a threat he scarcely hoped to be able to parry. He did not notice us at first; his whole attention was occupied by his pursuer, who now unhurriedly entered the dining room after him. She was a middle-aged woman of striking beauty, with flowing auburn hair and a complexion as white as paper. Her voluptuous body was clad in a glossy black evening gown of the modern style, and diamonds glittered at her throat. I had met Claire Westbrooke on two occasions, but even had I not, Westbrooke’s late wife would have been impossible not to recognise from her portrait in his study.

I knew that Westbrooke’s fanatical desire to revive the dead had been fuelled by the loss of his own wife; but the possibility of her actually figuring among his experimental subjects had literally never occurred to me. In hindsight my naiveté astonishes me.

Westbrooke's research had always been for Claire; in bringing her back he had merely done the most obvious thing.

Westbrooke backed slowly into the room, Claire keeping pace with him, until he encountered resistance in the form of the dining table; he stopped, and so did she. His eyes, stretched wide in an exaggerated expression of horror, gazed into the unfathomable black eyes of his wife. From her pale grey lips issued a question, muted by the unnatural dryness of her larynx, but still containing an unmistakable tone of alarm: 'Charles, what are you doing?'

I gasped loudly. Westbrooke turned to look at me, only at me, and his face was filled with a terrible guilt. I knew that his mind was collapsing under the pressure of the night's events, and an image came into my own mind that made me wish, just for a moment, to share in the release of his madness. It was an image too vivid and too terrible to bear: Claire Westbrooke at her dressing table one evening in 1864, disturbed by a sound behind her, looking up to see her husband; gazing at him, at first apathetically and then with dawning horror; and her last words - *Charles, what are you doing?* - a pitifully inadequate voicing of her dismay as Westbrooke's hands closed around her throat.

'You said she was killed by thieves; I said expressionlessly.

Westbrooke was still looking at me as his wife's corpse embraced him. 'You know, Victoria,' he said, 'if she had fallen in love with another man I would just have let her go. I could have forgiven her that. But she wasn't having an affair. Her sense of honour would never have permitted it. She just no longer wanted *me:*

'Charles, what are you doing?' Claire asked again. Her delicate white hands clawed insistently at Westbrooke's body, and he did not resist them. 'We must help him!' cried Jamie.

'We're too late, Jamie; said the Doctor solemnly. 'Much too late.' Claire's hands fastened around Westbrooke's neck.

'It was a *beautiful* discovery I made, Doctor!' cried Westbrooke. A tear ran down his cheek. His statement was also a question; he was

seeking the Doctor's approval.

Claire snapped Westbrooke's neck, forcibly enough to send the single tear flying off his face. Her head swivelled with an audible crackling of her cervical vertebrae, and she looked at me, as her husband had done. 'Charles, what are you doing?' she said.

A hand grasped mine.With my eyes fixed on Claire, I took a moment to realise that it was only the Doctor, anxious to lead me from the scene.

'Come on, Victoria; he said. 'We need to find Westbrooke's chemical laboratory. Jamie! You too.We can't stay here:

We ran. The Doctor had no difficulty in deducing that Westbrooke's storehouse of chemicals would be on the ground floor; but either his luck or his knowledge of Georgian architecture must be considerable: he located the laboratory at the front of the house after only two incorrect guesses, and without our encountering any more of Westbrooke's experimental subjects.

We entered the laboratory and looked cautiously around. I had expected to find bed-like trolleys of the kind used in hospitals or morgues, bearing hunched shapes beneath white sheets, or tanks of liquid containing human forms floating in translucent fluid; but nothing of the kind was to be seen. Perhaps Westbrooke kept such things in a second laboratory.As well as hundreds of jars filled with different chemicals, the room did contain a large and ancient blackboard. From the narrow wooden shelf at its base the Doctor picked up a piece of white chalk and sucked it worriedly

'We have to stop Westbrooke's project here; he said to us. 'Stop it completely, tonight. Not a trace of his research must remain - no one must ever hear of it. If the Victorians recoil from biology now, the future progress of medicine will be impeded.All kinds of crucial discoveries will be delayed, perhaps never happen at all'

The Doctor turned to the blackboard and began shuffling steadily from left to right along it, his forehead wrinkled in concentration, the piece of chalk chattering against the board's surface as he

scribbled a lengthy formula. He stood back for a moment to study his work, and then hurriedly added a second line of symbols beneath the first. Jamie studied the blackboard with a perplexed expression. ‘What is it, Doctor?’ he asked.

The Doctor turned to us, his face grim. ‘Something I hoped I’d never have to think about again,’ he said. He put one arm around Jamie’s shoulders and another around mine. ‘Now listen very carefully, you two. There are certain discoveries that are better not made. Mr Westbrooke found that out this evening. On the blackboard is another example:

‘A chemical formula?’ I guessed.

‘Instructions for making a very special chemical,’ said the Doctor, his mouth tight with distaste. ‘The invention of one of my own people. Something that I campaigned for years to have banned where I come from - successfully I might add: he said with a brief gleam of pride, gripping his lapels and beaming at us both.Then his face darkened again. ‘It’s a weapon. I believe its inventor euphemistically termed it a disruption agent.A catalyst that converts vertebrate blood into acid’

‘Catalyst?’ Jamie enunciated the word cautiously, no doubt experiencing the unwelcome sensation that events were slipping away from him again.

‘Yes Jamie. Within two or three seconds of mixing with blood, it produces a flurry of molecular activity too vigorous to reverse, a runaway chemical reaction. Only trace amounts of it are required to produce the effect, and the elegant part is that the substance itself undergoes no permanent chemical change. An exquisitely vicious solution to a very old problem - how to kill your enemy before he has the opportunity to kill you:

I was a little taken aback.’But why would you memorise the formula for a beastly thing like that?’

‘I didn’t, Victoria. Some things you tend not to forget’

With an uncomfortable feeling of premonition, I asked: ‘How strong is ,the acid - the acid that it makes of your blood?’

But the Doctor only looked at me with the sad eyes of one who has not the heart to answer a question, for fear of the hurt the answer might cause.

‘Are you going to use it, Doctor?’ Jamie asked with unseemly eagerness. The Doctor rubbed his chin. All the constituent liquids are present in this laboratory. It would simply be a matter of combining them in the right sequence and the right proportions. I don’t like it one little bit, but I’m not sure

Westbrooke’s experimental subjects can be stopped in another way.’

‘How long will it take to make, Doctor?’ I asked.

‘Its inventor spent several hours carefully mixing the chemicals to make the sample that I saw tested.’ The Doctor gazed around the laboratory at the glass jars and bottles cramming the wooden shelves. ‘But under these circumstances, I could hurry. Do it in say - eight to ten minutes: Jamie and I exchanged a sceptical glance:With two laboratory assistants to fetch me the chemicals I ask for.’

‘What will we do when we’ve got it, Doctor?’ asked Jamie:Throw it at the beasties?’

‘No, Jamie, that wouldn’t work.The chemical itself isn’t acidic. We need a delivery system to introduce it intravenously. That’s the real problem.’ ‘A rifle that fires tranquiliser darts,’ I said.

The Doctor turned to me, appearing slightly surprised. ‘Yes, quite right, Victoria! Something like a tranquiliser rifle. I really should be able to improvise one. Now, a few basic components -’

‘No, Doctor,’ I said. Westbrooke has one - I mean had one. He used to hunt wild animals on safari when he was a young man’ I clearly remembered being shown the rifle on one of my visits to the house.As a hunter Westbrooke had enjoyed the chase, but had had mixed feelings about the kill; lacking the appetite for slaughter, he

had often used the elegant American firearm to bring down his quarry without having to kill it. I mentioned the gun now with a curious spirit of reluctance; this nominating of an appropriate weapon made me wholly complicit in the night's horrors, and for an instant I seemed to feel, as it were, the posthumous disappointment of my parents.

'Can you remember where the rifle is?' asked the Doctor.

'Mounted in the main hallway, among many other firearms,' I told him. 'Really?' said the Doctor gloomily. 'How providential'

'Will it work, Doctor?' asked Jamie enthusiastically.

'Well,' replied the Doctor, 'such devices are apparently useful for subduing wild animals. I suppose we're going to see what happens when we turn this one to a slightly different purpose.'

Within fifteen minutes we were on our way back to the main hall.The Doctor, gripping a vial of brownish liquid, seemed to be mastering the layout of the house very quickly now.The rifle was quickly removed from its mounted glass case, which Jamie appeared to take some pleasure in smashing.The liquid the Doctor had synthesised, in itself harmless to the touch, was substituted without difficulty for the calmative chemical in the small black darts that we also retrieved from the case. When the rifle was properly loaded, Jamie took charge of it. Naturally there was no question of my being offered the gun, but it was only later that I realised there was never any question of the Doctor's taking it either; a rifle would have looked more incongruous in his hands than in mine

'Now we must search the house,' the Doctor said:Jamie, be ready to use that weapon each time we encounter one of Westbrooke's subjects.'

'Aye, Doctor,' he said as we began our progress from room to room. 'Ye can count on me'

We entered Westbrooke's library. It was one of the largest rooms in

his house, and its contents would have done justice to a small public library. It was even arranged like one: the many thousands of books accumulated by Westbrooke could not all be accommodated in the shelves covering the walls from floor to ceiling, so he had added freestanding bookcases to house the rest of his collection.

The library had a visitor: a young man, thickset and thuggish in appearance, was stumbling toward us down its main aisle. He was dressed in a cheap-looking grey suit with a dirty white shirt beneath; both jacket and shirt were open at the throat. His face was pale yellow, and the ugly smudge of a bruise darkened the whole left side of his neck. His left arm was raised toward us, the fingers clawing at the air, while his right arm hung at his side, its fingers twitching spasmodically. He was closing the distance between us at a pace that left little time for thought.

I screamed - loudly, I suppose. It served to clear my head. But Jamie, holding the tranquiliser rifle, appeared mesmerised. 'Jamie,' the Doctor said carefully. 'When I say shoot, shoot'

The dead man raised his other arm. His mouth opened. 'Go to hell,' he said.

A cold wave of horror rolled over me. These had been the man's last words in this world, or so he had planned; and in an instant they indicated to me the meaning of the bruise on his neck. The noose had pressed deeply as he thrashed beneath the scaffold; but his final words - *go to hell* - had been spat belligerently into the faces of his executioners a second before the lever was pulled.

'Shoot,' said the Doctor quietly.

'They cannae be killed, Doctor,' Jamie whispered.

'Shoot! Jamie, pull the trigger.'

Jamie was staring, as if mesmerised, directly into the dried-out eyes of the advancing young man He was still clutching the tranquiliser rifle but appeared to have forgotten all about it; its barrel was wavering visibly.

‘Go to hell,’ the young man said again. His mouth did not close properly this time; his lower jaw remained hanging down in an expression of surprise as he reached out his groping hands toward us.

‘Jamie, now!’ cried the Doctor.The Highlander did not respond.

I surprised myself by what I did next, but I relate my actions without embellishment. I took a pace forward and plucked the rifle from Jamie’s hands. He surrendered it without resistance or comment. I raised the rifle, braced the stock against my shoulder, aimed carefully at the young man’s bare throat, and pulled the trigger. There was a sharp pop, reminiscent of the sound of a child’s toy gun, and a small black dart appeared at the man’s Adam’s apple.A trickle of brownish liquid emerged from beneath it: whether the man’s unnaturally fortified blood or the Doctor’s ‘very special chemical’, I had no way of telling.The man stopped in his tracks, his cold right hand reaching out to brush against my face. We took a step backward, as did he.

‘Go to hell; he said, raising dead fingers to claw feebly at the dart embedded in his throat.

‘Don’t look; was the Doctor’s advice; it went unheeded on this occasion. We could not tear our eyes away from the figure of the young man. In my mind I heard the question I had put to the Doctor earlier, repeated quite distinctly in my own voice: *How strong is the acid?* That was the question the Doctor had chosen not to answer. But a voice in my mind, not the Doctor’s, now supplied a species of reply, something half remembered from a fairy tale Papa had used to enjoy reading to me when I was a little girl: *All the better to eat you with, my dear*

The young man raised both hands to touch his face, and then shakily lowered them again. He appeared to be weeping soundlessly: tears of brownish liquid, like dirty pond water, disengaged themselves from his eyes and coursed down his cheeks. Soon a trickle of the same liquid was seen at one corner of his slackly open mouth: one comer, and then the other. He made a

curious whining sound that seemed to emanate from deep within his chest, and took two more unsteady steps backwards, until he was leaning drunkenly against one of Westbrooke's well-stocked bookcases.

'I don't think I want to see; I said; but I did not look away or close my eyes.

More brown tears slid down the young man's face, and presently his eyeballs became detached from their sockets and followed them. His nose softened into an irregular shape, and a moment later his jaw dislocated with a moist snap and dropped clear of his face, catching in the folds of his shirt. His whole body seemed to be shifting and rearranging itself beneath his clothes, from which thin plumes of yellowish steam were beginning to rise. His hands were changing too: the fingernails unpeeled one by one and pattered to the floor, while the flesh of the hands was liquefying, revealing the white bones of metacarpus and phalanges within. The body settled itself more firmly against the bookcase. The volumes whose titles were readable were mostly textbooks of human biology, I noticed absently.The comical aptness of this seemed to liberate me to look away, and in that moment I saw on the Doctor's face the most desolate expression of sadness and regret I have ever seen.

When I looked back at the young man his scalp was sliding forwards over his forehead like a ludicrously unconvincing hairpiece, and both of his ears had now come away; one of them rested incongruously on his left shoulder like an epaulette. Then his face collapsed into a flood of gore, and his whole body, steaming ferociously inside its sizzling clothes, sank back into the bookcase and passed cleanly through it, melting a man-shaped hole through wood and paper, and falling out of view on the far side with a liquid crash.

The noise broke Jamie's trance. 'I'm sorry, Victoria,' he said. He was apologising for his earlier paralysis; but that seemed a long time ago. He took the rifle gently back from me.'I can finish this now. You can trust me.'

At the far side of the library we entered the corridor that

terminated in the second stairway, which led up to the guest bedrooms on the middle floor. We moved together through room after room, seeking to be as systematic as possible; but some of the rooms on this floor were out of bounds now, filled with smoke or fully ablaze as the fire from the top floor spread steadily through the house, everywhere fuelled by the wooden furnishings in which Westbrooke had invested so much.

We spent a bleak and nightmarish hour tracking down the remainder of Westbrooke's subjects. I must not dwell on it; in the end we located them all. Poor Jamie, desperate to redeem himself after his loss of nerve in the library, made sure he dispatched each creature with the rifle before it could come close enough to us to express its bewilderment through violence. The fat man who had so terrified me in the hallway was in Westbrooke's bedroom, where he had torn most of the linen to ribbons and was found stuffing fragments of shredded pillowcase into his mouth. Two shadowy creatures we located together in the scullery, staring blankly at each other as if each was silently trying to remember the other's name; one of them had been clawing repeatedly at its own face in a mindless spasmodic motion, opening a ragged wound in its cheek from which brown blood was steadily pulsing. The haphazard amalgam of human parts from the wine cellar was found gambolling blindly in a corridor on the middle floor, crashing repeatedly against the walls; at some point it had caught fire, but it was still highly mobile.

Claire Westbrooke took longer to find. She had made her way to her husband's study, and by the time we found her she had raked her long fingernails down the portrait of herself so many times that she had ravaged both her hands and the picture. Jamie's aim never faltered, and each of Westbrooke's experimental subjects went the way of the young man in the library.The sights and sounds of each grisly act of destruction will haunt me throughout my life.

We could not have afforded to take any longer about our business. (Throughout our search we were conscious of the fire securing its grip on the house at an accelerating pace, and when we returned from the study to the main hall, the thick carpet running down the principal stairway was fiercely ablaze, filling the hall with thick

grey smoke.

‘You two must get out of here now,’ said the Doctor urgently:Wait for me outside. The fire will spread to Westbrooke’s laboratory in a few minutes, and I must make one last trip there first.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘One more recipe I’d like to try,’ said the Doctor. ‘All of Westbrooke’s notes and equipment, every trace of what he discovered, must be utterly destroyed.We can’t trust a conventional house fire to accomplish that. But if my rather rusty knowledge of chemistry serves me one more time, I think I can make sure no one ever learns what happened here tonight:

‘There’s no time for any clever stuff, Doctor!’ protested Jamie. ‘The whole house is going to go up!’There was no disputing this; the smoke in the hallway was catching in our throats and making our eyes water, and the noise of burning was deafening now, roaring at us from every side. But the Doctor was already hurrying towards the laboratory. Jamie and I left by the main door and hurried hand in hand down the stone steps, gratefully gasping in lungfuls of the night air, which, though smelling increasingly like a bonfire, seemed fresh by comparison with the air inside the house.

At what we deemed a safe distance, we crouched down behind a row of box-bushes and anxiously watched the spread of the fire, waiting for the Doctor to come out. Plumes of orange flame were visible on all three storeys of the house now, and many of the windows splintered and burst in the intense heat, releasing floods of white smoke into the night.

After an almost unbearable period of waiting, the Doctor appeared at the main door, glanced quickly around and then scurried down the stone stairway. He dashed across the several expanses of lawn that Jamie and I had crossed, his limbs appearing rather uncoordinated in a way that suggested that running did not come naturally to him. He threw himself down next to us, then we three crouched together behind Westbrooke’s box-bushes and watched in grim fascination as his house burned. Presently the flames reached

the chemical laboratory on the ground floor, and the room abruptly exploded with a coughing roar that sprayed fragments of wood and glass across the lawn.

‘It’s over,’ said Jamie, and got to his feet. But the Doctor reached up and dragged him impatiently back to the ground.

‘Not yet, Jamie,’ said the Doctor. ‘The fuse is lit; that’s all.’

So we settled down again to watch the house. The explosion in the laboratory had established new fires in adjacent rooms, and everywhere Westbrooke’s residence was consuming itself in heat and violence. I opened my mouth to enquire what the Doctor had meant by ‘the fuse is lit’, then thought better of it. I had already witnessed the efficacy of the chemistry that the Doctor carried in his head: chemistry from a place where science and magic had become indistinguishable, where anything was possible. Chemistry of that kind could be relied upon to work.

Perhaps Jamie’s thoughts followed different lines to my own; or perhaps he was less patient than I. Whatever his reason, he opened his mouth to ask the Doctor what we were waiting for.

‘What -’ Jamie began, and at that moment Westbrooke’s entire house came apart, unfolding itself into the night. In one breathless moment the building was standing, burning but intact; in the next came an immense explosion that disintegrated every part of it at once, and a thousand million fragments of wood, plaster, stone and glass were propelled outward by a raging ball of fire that glowed pure white. For a while there was nothing in the universe but airborne debris. Then, as the ball of fire dissipated, we saw that no trace remained of the structure of the house: it had been eradicated to its foundations. We climbed unsteadily to our feet while the fragments were still falling, too small and too light to drop quickly, pattering gently into our hair and onto our shoulders like rain.

I looked at Jamie, whose mouth was still open in the act of phrasing his redundant question; then at the Doctor, who in his moment of triumph simply looked tired. ‘Complete thermal site erasure; he remarked to no one in particular. ‘Well, that’s that:

I shall not go back to 1866 again. The Doctor tells me that in my future, ‘Victorian’ becomes a byword for progress and innovation, that the revolutions of thought instigated by my people change the future of the world. And ‘Victorian’ once signified to me so much that was special: fragrant summer gardens, elegant homes and cheerful welcomes, libraries with their atmosphere of curiosity and optimism, seaside resorts with their briny smell and their gaudy mechanical slot machines; pursuing childish games in the schoolyard, marvelling at the ingenuity of clockwork toys, riding in horse-drawn trams, strolling by the river in the park at sundown.

But my mind has been changed. ‘Victorian’ now calls to mind only the squalid deaths of my beloved father and of the foolish murderer Westbrooke, each seeking to achieve immortality as a benefactor of the human species, and each crucified by his own ambition. In an age whose defining characteristic is intellectual pride, there is no home for someone like me. My home henceforth must be the TARDIS, and each new environment that materialises around it. My family will be Jamie and the Doctor, I am set on it; if I cannot love my native time, I will love them instead.

Echo
Lance Parkin

Thing is, I was lost, okay? I admit it.

You try it. It's like one of them mazes you get in the gardens of big houses sometimes. Only with the TARDIS, the maze is also the house. Everything's linked by long corridors, and the walls of those corridors look the same - spotless white walls with rows of these round lights on them. White floors and ceilings. Identical doors on both sides, at various points.Yeah, every so often you'll find something in the corridor. A straw hat, a broken bit of machinery. Once I found some painting just lying on the floor. It looked well valuable, and I thought I recognised it but later I saw the picture I thought it was in a book about Van Gogh, and it was a bit different because the man in it had a bandage on his other ear.

My room in the TARDIS is close to the control room. And there's this food dispenser thing nearby. That's usually all I need, right. I know what you're thinking, but my room's on sweet, so that's not a problem.Although I admit I daren't tell the Professor I can't get the shower to work properly. It has this control panel that would confuse a Jumbo Jet pilot. I wash myself in the sink and use plenty of deodorant, which is cool 'cause I need the empty cans anyway.

Anyway, I was lost. It was my fault, because it was night and I didn't want to go to sleep, and I was bored and I'd only just come on board the TARDIS and I wanted to know my way around. I'd had a bit of an explore, and I'd found his laboratory that was like Frankenstein's lab, but with better lights. I didn't tell the Professor, because I could tell straight away that I could use it to make Nitro and I didn't want him locking the door.

I couldn't always find the laboratory, though. I thought I had the way there mapped out, but I must be wrong. Either that or the TARDIS rooms move around when I'm not looking, which I'm not ruling out. So H was looking around, and thought I was with the laboratory. But I kept opening doors, and there was all sorts of

other things instead. There was a room full of boxes of jigsaw puzzles.There was this room with these big crates in, or that one with that big tree that seemed to grow out of the floor. Then there was rooms just stuffed full of junk, like everyone's attic. Only not everyone's attic has the arms from the Venus de Milo and bits of Apollo moon landers in it.

So that's how I found the zoo. At least that's what I think it was. It looked dead cruel at first, because the cages looked really small, but they were like the TARDIS, bigger on the inside. So some of them were only a bit bigger than them boxes you take the cat to the vet in, but you look in and you can see that there's loads of room in there.

I didn't recognise most of the animals. There were mammals and birds and fish. Insects, and snails and all sorts of stuff that I don't think has names None of the cages had names on them. Some of them looked well hard.There was this thing that looked like a tiger, but it was a lizard with these huge claws. I wish I knew how the Doctor managed to get it into its box.Then there were things with flat bodies, and things that looked like big wasps, and this thing that looked like a walrus.

There was this one thing that I recognised but hadn't seen before.This was a dodo. I did a thing on them at school.They came from Mauritius, I remember that, but I don't know where that is.Africa, I think.Anyway, it's an island. And in the seventeenth century, people discovered it, and they met these birds that were like big turkeys. These were dodos, and they didn't know anything about people, so they came hopping over to say hello, then the people shot them all.You can guess the moral of the tale, yeah?

So what was this dodo doing here? I'm guessing the Doctor rescued it. Probably in that cage somewhere was a girl dodo. Or, if this one was a girl dodo, it would be a boy dodo. And they'd have chicks. Or perhaps they were both boy dodos, and they were cool with that, and that's the real reason they became extinct. Anyway, this thing looked dead good, and it was a turkey. In an ideal world, I'd have let out that tiger-lizard thing, but I could see how that might have caused problems. So I decided to let out the dodo. I found this

control on the side of the cage, and I pressed it, and the top and front sort of folded back.

The dodo hopped out, and looked around. It looked well happy to be out, and started looking around the room. I stood there, and eventually it hopped over to me.And I looked into its eye, and it looked back.

Then the toerag bit me! Honest! It whacked me with that beak. And it really hurt. It got my hand, and cut it.

'You're meant to be timid and trustful!' I shouted at it.

The dodo was running towards the door. I tried to stop it, but it swung that beak at me again and then it was out the door and running down a corridor.

I chased it. None of this was my fault, you can see that, right? It was that dodo that did all this. Okay. Anyway, this thing was small, like a turkey. But it was whizzing along like Road Runner. And it was dead sneaky, too, because once it waited for me round a corner, then ran back past me, under my legs.

In my school essay I said at the end it was a shame that the dodos all got killed, but now I really wanted to catch this one and make dodo nuggets out of it.

Then it jumped down the hole.

What hole? You're asking. This hole, right: it was one of them circles in the wall, but there was no light on this one, just this big hole.And it was big enough for me to get down, too. I thought about it, and I realised that I could always plead innocence if the Doctor found this dodo (or its bones) at some point. But then I thought I should catch it, in case it harmed itself.

So I jumped down the hole, too. It was like a waterslide, and at first it was well fun, but then it kept going, and I started to worry.The Professor said the TARDIS was infinite, so what if this slide thing was like a light year long or something, and I'd still be sliding down

it in fifty thousand years' time? Or what if it was some waste disposal thing, and I was about to be diced up?

I fell for quite a long time. So long, I stopped being worried and started being a bit bored.

Then I crashed into a pile of old clothes. And I mean a pile. It was like twenty feet high.

I think the hole was a laundry chute. The clothes weren't too bad, but they'd been wom. Some of them had been there so long that they'd got more dusty waiting to be washed than they probably had been when they were put there. And some of the clothes at the bottom were practically fossilised. And there were all sorts of clothes - men's and women's, underwear and fur coats, hats and shoes, scarves and g,loves. There was stuff for young girls and old men, there was stuff that was historical and stuff that looked like it was from outer space.

I rolled off the pile of clothes. I could hear the dodo in the next room. There was nothing in this room but a pile of clothes (and a hole in the ceiling, obviously). It was a bit dark and dingy.

Next door was like this vast warehouse. Rails and rails and rails and rails and rails of clothing. There wasn't much light, it was like there were spotlights. I guess this was so the clothes didn't fade, because I doubt the TARDIS worried too much about saving on the electricity bills.

So I looked around for the dodo, and I could already tell this was going to be tricky. I carried on looking for ages. I was getting a bit tired now, because it was the middle of the night and I hadn't had any sleep yet.

I found a mirror. One of those big long full-length ones. Next to it was this weird tan robe and skullcap, just lying there on the floor. I thought it was probably a Time Lord gown, you know, because it looked like that. It didn't have that collar thing, but it looked like it was for a priest or a monk or something, but from space. But it wasn't the Doctor's. He's like a real shorty, yeah, but this was even

smaller.

I realised it would fit me almost exactly.

Now, this isn't like me at all, but I thought I'd try it on. Like there was a reason I'd ended up down here. I was in my jacket and everything, and the robe wouldn't go on over that, and so I took my clothes off - not my underwear, you pervert, but everything else.And then I wriggled into this robe. And it fit like it was made for me. It was dead dusty, but it was actually quite comfortable. I slipped the skullcap on. Then I thought I would look in the mirror, but then I decided I didn't want to.

I don't know why, it just seemed the wrong thing to do. But that was stupid, so I looked.

And there was this man standing behind me in the reflection. It was like Dracula's cute son or something - all black robes and pale skin. And he was about my age. I knew he wasn't really behind me, so I didn't even turn to look. He was really big, like he filled the mirror. I suppose I ought to have been scared, but I don't get scared, okay, so anyone that said I was scared is wrong. I was thinking how I looked like a megafrump in my new brown robes. It occurred to me then that Drac Junior probably saw me in my bra and knickers just then.

He reached out, though the mirror, and his hand came out of it. I thought the mirror would crack or ripple, but it just came out, like it wasn't a mirror at all, but a doorframe.And I felt calm, like I knew all this would happen, like it was strangely familiar. An echo of something from before.

'Is he here?' he asked.

'Who do you mean?' I said, trying to sound brave.

'You know who,' he told me. And, of course, I did. He wasn't talking about the dodo, was he?

'He's here,' I said, trying to warn him off, but he just smiled. 'Has he

told you about the old time?'

'Oh yeah, the Professor's always going on about the old time. Can't shut him up on the subject'

'Has he talked about me?'

I shrugged. 'Well, you ain't Quasimodo:

He looked confused.

'You don't ring a bell,' I told him. I don't think he got it.

'You are a human being,' he told me, studying me carefully.

'Thanks very much' He wasn't exactly paying me a compliment, but I guess in these clothes, he might have thought I was a Time Lord for about three seconds.

'You seem full of life'

'So are you one of them life forms that feeds on life energy, then?' I asked, still not scared.

Ah... no'

'So what are you?'

'I'm not a life form'

I was getting a bit fed up of this. If I've learned anything about this 'old time', it's that people from it can't explain things right, and they never give a straight answer. So I went for the direct approach, and asked: 'You ain't? What are you?' 'The corridors of this ship are so very long.'

'Tell me about it.You should see the laundry chute'

'Sound bounces from walls. Images are reflected. Given... time, these things coalesce'

‘Like an echo?’

He smiled encouragingly, and relaxed a little, like I’d made a connection. ‘Yes,’ he started, ‘I was the original -’

And then the dodo came bombing through a rack of clothes and launched straight at me. I’d forgotten all about that psycho turkey thing, and it caught me off guard. It was an ambush, I’m telling you. I was knocked over, and so was the mirror.

I grabbed the dodo.The horrible thing kept fighting and pecking at me. So I grabbed my bomber jacket off the floor and covered the bird with it, then I found this long scarf and tied up the jacket so it was all trussed up. I made sure its head was sticking out, though. It kept squawking at me the whole time, and tried to get me. So I left it to one side for a moment.

I thought the mirror would have shattered, but it didn’t. I set it upright again. There was glass there, it wasn’t just a door. But the man wasn’t there.

I was left alone in this great Batcave of a wardrobe. Well, alone except for the dodo.Already, I was finding it hard to remember exactly what the man looked like, or what his voice had sounded like. Now I was more worried about changing back into my real clothes and how I’d get back to a bit of the ship I recognised.

But later I thought about it. I would have asked the Professor, but... you know. It’s not like he ever gave a straight answer.That thing was an echo, right? And it could speak and see and hear. No one had been down there for centuries. So it had been alive longer than me, or any other human being, in its way. Was it another creature the Doctor had put in a zoo, like the dodo? Or had it once been an echo, but it had evolved somehow, becoming more and more sophisticated until it was more than a mere echo?

Or perhaps - and this only came to me this morning, it’s why I’m saying this now - it never said *it* was the echo, did it? So who’s the echo? Think about it, yeah?

A Rose by Any Other Name

Jim Mortimore

The traveller stands.

A world of dust lies before him. Nothing is possible here. He hates it like this.

The girl beside him scowls. Is this really how it ends for them, to have so much and fall so low? They're like monkeys, just animals. They can't even speak anymore.' The girl bites her lip. Her fists clench. All her strength. Powerless.

He listens, interested in what she will find to say.

'Surely we can help them? Save them? We need to find teachers, that's all. Re-educate them. Show them what they've lost.'

He says nothing. Her sentiment is noble; she knows the value of a lie. They're too far gone, aren't they? There's no way back for them.'

He finds he needs to smile.

It'll take a miracle.'

Fern observed his reflection in the bathroom mirror. Eyes: calm. Cheeks: smooth. Lips: rosy. Composure: placid. How we doing, *Fern? I* enquired.

'Pretty fine.'

Glad to hear it.

I watched Fern watching himself disinterestedly. It was as if he gazed at his reflection only because he couldn't be bothered to find anything else more interesting to look at. I observed him visually and at a physiological depth Fern himself could not. Voice: 0.4db

and stress-free. Posture: normal/submissive. Core body temperature: within .05 per cent of mean. Eye movement: minimal. Pupil dilation: none. Blush response: none. Fern did not interest hiinself much these days, and for me that was a source of worry, to say the very least.

Anything special in mind for today? I asked.

'Hadn't thought' Fern's tonal range matched his vocabulary. I couldn't remember the last time he had asked a question. Would you like me to *suggest* an itinerary?

Fern's shrug - like his voice - came as I had learned to expect: indifferent; the flex of muscle little more than a twitch; the subtle pressure of skin against my neuro-feedback pads so minute as to be virtually undetectable for anything as coarse as the human nervous system.

'That would be fine, I guess,' Fern said. OK. What *if we* start *by* flossing?

'Okey-smokey:

Then, after breakfast, *we* can take a ride to Plaza and stack some more suits.

Fern nodded solemnly. The tendons of his neck pressed against my collar. I analysed the contraction of muscles and capillary blood flow. In the mirror, Fern's pupils dilated minutely. The word *ride* seemed significant.The word *suit* did not.

Fern squeezed toothpaste, brushed and flossed. His movements were considered, his coordination average. I reminded him to rinse.

Fern carefully folded his flannel and hung it on its hook, replaced the soap in the soap dish, capped the toothpaste and replaced it and his toothbrush in the exact spot on the second shelf in the cabinet from which he had taken it. His toilet complete, he then turned and walked carefully across the apartment, bare feet dimpling the deep carpet in a familiar path around the flow-form furniture. Fern

stopped beside the picture window, through which I could see a forest of glass and steel rising from impenetrable shadows, the morning sun striking sparks from the burnished ledges and domes of the city.

A hundred million buildings. Ten billion homes. Sixty billion windows. And no lights. No lights anywhere.

Fern peered out through the windows. I waited as I had every day for twenty-three years to see if Fern's posture would change; if the sight of the city, the sheer weight of unchanging solitude, would evoke an even slightly more alert posture; if it would trigger any kind of response whatsoever, beyond the expression of slightly disconnected interest that was Fern's habitual stock-in-trade. It did not. Then again, I would have been surprised if it had.

Would you like to open the *window, Fern?* I enquired.

'Okay, sure.'

The morning air was cold and clear. I heard an eagle cry out somewhere in the distance. Fern's thinning hair flopped sideways.Thick fingers closed over my arm. Fern was unconsciously rubbing the four-centimetre-long talon scars on his right arm. He shivered. I increased my internal temperature by two degrees. Fern's goose bumps subsided. After a few seconds his arms dropped to his sides. He had forgotten about the scars. After two or three minutes watching the empty city, Fern began to fidget. He frowned.

Are you bored, Fern? I enquired.

'Hadn't thought. Guess so, though.'

Shall *we take* a ride, Fern?

Instead Fern moved back into the apartment and switched on the television.Two soap stars, a man and a woman, were screeching abuse at one another. A child gazed in wide-eyed terror from one parent to the other. Fern stared fixedly into the screen for a long time. Then he sat down. A flow-form chair positioned itself to catch

him and wrapped comfortably around his body - around me as well.

The television asked Fern to confirm its programme selection. Fern didn't seem to notice. Lacking a human response, it began to surf channels in a pattern set centuries before. The arguing parents were banished by a familiar series of alternative programming. A cop show. A science educational. A children's animated adventure. Fern let the channels churn.A talk show.A biography series.A nature documentary. Fern sat quite still, gaze fixed on the screen. Eventually the autosurfer selected the pornography channels. Images of lovemaking. Men and women. Women and women. Men and men. Fern touched himself. It was the only self-generated movement aside from breathing Fern had made since waking.

Four hours later and wary of bedsores, I suggested, Hey, Fern, you know what? The sun's up now. It's *nice out. We* could take a ride to Plaza and stack those suits like *we said.*

'I'm tired:

True enough Fern's heart rate had slowed. He was close to dozing. I heated his trousers until they reached a temperature uncomfortable for human skin, then suggested it might be nice to take a walk outside where the air was cool and fresh. Maybe *we* could evenfind a little lunch.

Fern nodded placidly. 'Sure, okay:

The chair unwrapped itself and Fern stood up.We didn't need to dress to go out. I suggested Fern put on a coat anyway. It lent him a dignified air.And made him seem more human.

Putting on the coat triggered a familiar response in Fern. His heart rate increased and his skin became warmer to the touch; his pupils dilated and his breathing deepened. His movements became jerky, almost excited. I didn't have to guide him to the apartment door but I did have to remind him to switch off the television.

And avoid stepping in the bear shit in the lobby, naturally.

The girl stands.

The City rises around het; and she feels like a pebble tossed into a stream, as the splash raises shining walls around the point of impact, high, higher higher still. It doesn't feel enclosed. A kaleidoscope of sky reflects across the chrome cliffs, reflections so perfect that, but for the odd curvature and shifting perspective, she might be standing on an open plain.

She takes a tiny step back.

Beside her the traveller seems insignificant A tiny coloured blot reflected crazily in the chrome landscape. Then he takes her arm and the fear goes away, receding like a splash, in ripples, with her agoraphobia.

It's amazing.' The words sigh out of her like winter breath, steaming. It's cold here. In more *ways than one. 'But so sad.'*

'Why sad?'

She takes a sideways step, putting distance between them. An experiment in self-reliance. 'Where are all the people?'

A tiny smile touches his lips. 'Let me show you something even more amazing.'

The girl shrugs. 'Okay, yeah. Show me something funky'

The traveller opens a door in the shining cliff the girl couldn't even see. Inside, a world in miniature:parks, shops, galleries, libraries, pools, a stadium.A city within a city. Russian dolls.

The girl stares. The city-within-a-city is rammed with black zippered cases. There must be thousands. Tens of thousands.

The girl emits a fractured laugh.A briefcase convention.' Its not very funny. Do the biros and blotters come here too?'

The traveller doesn't answer. His eyes are moving swiftly. Counting, calculating. It might be... there might be enough.'

The girl opens a case at random. 'Okay, this is weird. Who would fill an entire building with clothes and not leave any room for the people?'She holds a suit up against her bomber jacket and twirls. 'You think this is me?' Put that back. It's dangerous.'

The girl grabs the arms of the suit and flings them round her neck. 'Oh yeah? What's it going to do, strangle me?' She gargles alarmingly, then laughs. Attack of the zombie fashion victims.'

Its dangerous to you

Something in his expression makes the girl drop the suit. She backs away warily. The traveller lifts the suit. There's no hint of a crease in the fabric. He folds the clothing reverently, places it back into its case. The zip locks shut.

He waits. Wondering what she'll do or say next. 'What are they?' she asks soberly.

It's a good question.

The future.' He takes one last look around, still carrying ones and zeros on his fingers. Help me get them aboard the ship.'

The elevator was waiting, doors open, as we had left it. Fern moved eagerly into the car and pushed the button for street level without prompting.

Outside the sunlight was cold and brilliant The light made Fern squint. I compensated by adjusting my translucency, and felt his cheek muscles relax.The buildings gleamed as if they'd been built only yesterday. I guided Fern carefully around a patch of frost. Nothing dangerous, but there was no sense in taking chances. Half a year from now in August I'd be reducing Fern's body temperature for optimal comfort. Now I raised his skin temperature three degrees to counteract the cold, while carefully regulating his humidity level. Fern was not getting any younger. Even with the regular exercise I encouraged him to take, he sweated easily when he walked, and had a tendency to get distracted if he was

uncomfortable.

Outdoors was no place for a man.

So tell me, Fern, I urged as we walked. Have you ever *wondered what* all *these buildings were for?*

‘Uh… We stack clothes in them:

No, before that. Did you ever *wonder* who built them?

‘People, I suppose.’

Would you like to have *seen* them as they were?

‘Sure, I guess’

But not today?

‘No’

But if you wanted to? Would you then?

‘Sure, I guess. Hey! Here’s the belt:

Fern took the ramp to platform one at a fast walk. His heart rate increased. I reduced his skin temperature and humidity to compensate for the exertion. He marched onto the platform and waited by the shuttle doors, hopping anxiously from foot to foot. I transformed the kinetic energy to potential energy and stored it.

Fern was excited. In his eagerness to board the carriage he had forgotten how to open the doors. I showed him where the push button was. He slapped it eagerly and jumped into the carriage the moment the doors opened. He stood by a window, blinking, breathing fast.

The shuttle won’t move unless you *close the* doors, Fern, I reminded him.

He slapped the button, in irritation more than excitement this time, and then ran back to the window as the shuttle eased away from the platform.

The city spread out around us. Fern gazed unblinking out of the window. Every few moments he would shift to another window. He never got bored with the view. Or maybe it was the inovement. The shuttle rocked with a gentle motion - still the impression of speed was overwhelming.

I had clothed Fern since he was a child and he had always loved travelling. Half a century later his excitement at taking the belt was the only obvious bit of his personality left.

'Hey,' Fern said suddenly.

I didn't answer right away. Fern hadn't started a conversation for more than three decades. I looked where he was looking, out of the shuttle and down into the City but I saw nothing. I wondered briefly what had caught his attention. What *did* you *see,* Fern?

He answered right away, and amiably enough, but I detected elevated stress levels in his voice. 'Me' His blood pressure was up. Something had spooked him

But *you're in* the shuttle, Fern. With me.

'I saw me. Two mes. I looked different though.' His voice acquired an edge. His hands were pressed against the shuttle canopy hard enough to whiten the knuckles. Curious. I hadn't thought he had enough imagination to be frightened.

I thought hard for a picosecond. Fern was frightened. I always kept him well exercised but time took its toll, as it inevitably did of all biological systems. Examination of his blood and endocrine system showed evidence of toxic build-up.A breath sighed in his throat.Another, sharply. His pupils dilated. His capillaries flushed. His head tilted sideways. His tendons spasmed at the unexpected and unprompted movement. His neck hair began to raise as his skin produced goose bumps. He was a long way from heart palpitation,

but still, he wasn't young.

'Me. Me, me. Me, me.' Fern shifted his weight from foot to foot, rocking slowly back and forth, for him a sign of extreme agitation. There was a catch in his voice, a hoarseness that suggested some long-smothered instinct had tried to produce a cry.

All of which was, to say the least, unusual.

I gave Fern a once-over, looking for indications of heart failure. An examination of his brain chemistry took a little longer. The examination revealed unusual characteristics. Chemical markers and protein chains I had not detected since Fern had been a child. As little as thirty years ago I would have said Fern was *interested* in something. The danger signs registered immediately.

Hey Fern, do you remember what *we* found for your last birthday?

'Uh, guess not.'

Surely you do, I prompted. *We* found it in the toy store; you remember.

'Babybear! Babybear! Growls when you squeeze him. Don't forget to feed him' I taught Fern the package slogan and for a month after we found the toy, Fern had repeated those words a dozen times a day. The eagle attack had eventually driven them from his mind. Now he dredged the catchy mnemonic from the depths of his long-term memory and chanted it softly. He even got the tune right. Fern began to relax. His skin temperature was normalising, his rocking motion gradually smoothing out. I detected toxins breaking down in his calf muscles, washed away and absorbed by his bloodstream.

I had the sense that a disaster had been narrowly averted. You know, Fern, it must be pretty uncomfortable standing up all the time, I suggested. Why don't you take *a seat?*

'Okay, sure'

Fern sat. His breathing calmed. He blinked slowly a few times. The

shuttle moved smoothly through the City. I felt Fern's weight increase slightly, his body distorting as the acceleration pressed us even more closely together. I adjusted my rigidity to compensate, pressing back gently against his skin to prevent even the slightest organ displacement. Fern was very important to me. His safety was paramount. I felt the pressure of his skin against mine and spent several thousand picoseconds wondering what he'd seen that had disturbed him so.

Wondering if, at last, it was *time. Me. Me, me.*

The traveller stands quite still, sniffing the air of this earlier time. Winter is coming. For Man there will be no spring.

'More than five billion years ago a lump of interstellar debris no bigger than a country farm touched your world.At that time there were more than fifty billion species alive. The energy released by the impact wiped out all forms of life hi gher than invertebrate. The only evidence that currently exists of this event in the geologic record is a thin strata of fossilised organic matter in some places no thicker than your skin.' The traveller blinks.'You poked your heads up out of the mud and the gods of physics noticed you.Your world was savaged. Six species of fern were all that survived.'

He studies the naked youth grubbing among the asphalt paving for winter berries. Beyond, the neatly pollarded tree- lined chrome and glass monuments rise three hundred storeys towards a flawless autumn sunset To the naked man they are as distant and empty and meaningless as the sky.

The City will be their next port of call. Now they have the man. think we'll call him Fern.'

Casually inverted, the girl hangs by her knees from a tree branch. 'Well it took us long enough to find him. Three hours! I hate this place. To know this is all we'll ever be. No one should know how they'll die. Now I know how my world dies.'

'He is the last of his kind. But necessary.'

‘For what.? The people we saw on that other world? How can he help? I mean he’s no Einstein, right? Even monkeys can fish for ants with a long blade of grass and a drop of honey I saw it on TV This guy… well, he’s worse off than they are, isn’t he? How can he be any good for them?’

The traveller considers. Many factors are involved. But the resonances are undeniable.Those others have lost the capacity to be human.’ And he hasn’t?’

‘Everything has a future.’

‘See, now if I’d’ve known you were gonna go all Zen on me I’d have stayed home and watched the match.’

The traveller hesitates. ‘There are no perfect answers.’ He wonders what she’ll do with this one.

They stand for a while, uncomfortably quiet. The wind blowing out of the shining cliffs moves gently through the bare branches of the trees. The naked man ignores wind and the watchers alike. He shows no glimmer of recognition; neither empathy nor fear. Their smells are unfamiliar and do not register. They might as well be invisible.

The traveller weighs the odds and draws a conclusion.

He’s thinking of a green VW family pram.A discarded suit. ‘We’ll begin with a trip to the automat.’ The girl chuckles. ‘The whole of space and time to choose from and all he wants is the dry-cleaners.’ I’ve told you before. Clothes make the man.’

Plaza was clean. That was no surprise. Fern and I had spent years of afternoons here undressing the bodies so the City could cremate them. Fern skinned his knuckles two months into the job and nearly died of blood poisoning. He was running a fever of a hundred and six and hallucinating badly by the time I walked him to the hospital the following day. It was as much as I could do to stop him bashing into the City e-posts we passed. Fortunately traffic flow through the City had ceased more than three thousand years before.

Traffic.

How long had it been since I had seen vehicles? Needed to take care when crossing the street, the slidewalk, the magrail?

There were more than a billion traffic lights in the City. A billion perfectly maintained and functioning traffic lights - and no pedestrians. I wondered how long it would be until the animals evolved far enough to use them, understand them. Would they look back into the past, straining to grasp the giants upon whose shoulders they stood, or would they simply accept without questioning the strange glowing monoliths that neither time nor wind could erode and incorporate them into their ever more sophisticated religions?

Fern stopped, his attention caught by a trisected lamp. It blinked lazily. Green. Amber. Red. Red. Red-amber. Green.

The Volkswagen had been green.

A simple green family pram with the VW logo on the hood. One headlight had been broken, the paint scuffed as if by children wielding soccer boots. Inside: two parents, one child, a pair of soccer boots and a shouted monologue. *Jeez, you dumb bitch! You want to be the best dressed corpse in the whole damn world? We need the space! Its spare food or spare clothes! Use your damn head why don't you?*

The monologue went on like that for a while. I remembered every word. I felt a rush of air as the window rolled down. My owners didn't even stop. Just threw me out like rubbish and drove on. I heard the argument continue, receding. Then a screech of tyres and a crash.A wave of heat rolled over me and the arguments ceased abruptly.

The City extinguished the flames quickly. Soon after, a trash pram swept me up with the rest of the day's rubbish. I was separated out and tubed to an automat.There I was scrubbed, degaussed, recharged and racked for collection. Once a day I was dusted.

I hung there, in darkness, for twenty-two centuries.

My memories of that day were very clear - other memories equally precise. My capacity wasn't infinite, but several thousand terabytes was a lot of space and I was careful to obtain regular servicing and upgrades from the City automats. My batteries would last as long as there was sunlight or regular exercise.

I reviewed the remaining memory highlights, closed the file and defragged I noted this process took almost a second longer than it had even ten years ago. I wondered if my systems needed an early service.

I realised that Fern had begun walking again, and had been doing so unguided for some seconds. That was a good way to get lost. I had a map of the City and I updated it regularly with animal trails and other ephemerals. But the lesson of the skinned knuckles and, more recently, the eagle, demonstrated I could never be too careful. Fern was all I had now. We had a responsibility to each other. And to the future.

The day was still cool even though the sun was high. I warmed Fern on one side subliminally, enough to suggest a couple of left turns, which should have brought us back to Plaza. Instead we found ourselves in a triangular space between three chromed skyscrapers.A tiny green neatly filled the space.Three paved walkways trisected the green, converging in a circular area whose centrepiece was a blown-glass fountain. The water bubbled quietly, shimmering in the cold sunlight, its similar refractive index making it almost indistinguishable from the glass from which it poured. Water and glass together formed a subtle and ever-shifting sculpture about three times the height of a man. Three pollarded trees grew, one each from the exact centre of each triangular plot of grass. I wondered how often over the last two thousand years the trees had been replaced by the City.These trees were young but the area showed no sign of recent replanting. The City was very efficient like that. Consulting my City map I saw at once where we'd gone wrong. Before I could guide Fern along a new route back to familiar ground I heard something - a sound between a throaty cough and a grunt. Fern froze.

I urged Fern to the left.

Drinking from the wide bowl on the other side of the fountain was a Kodiak bear.

Fern was making a low keening noise. He'd smelt the bear long before it's slow movement registered on his eyes. His pulse rate was up, his skin flushed. You know Fern, I think *we* took a *wrong* turn back there. What *do* you say *we go* back the way *we came?*

'Babybear! Babybear! Growls when you squeeze him. Don't forget to feed him

' Fern!

'Okay. Okay, sure. Let's go back.'

Fern turned, legs pumping. I felt the shock of unmodulated steps, increasing in speed. He was starting to panic. Behind us, attracted by Fern's jerky motion, the bear looked up.

No point in running, Fern, I suggested. Don't want to wear yourself out now, do you? How about a little sit down? Perhaps if Fern remained quite still, the bear would go back to drinking and we could sneak away.

I wondered how hungry the bear was.

Fern was wondering too. He began to run.

Fern was not a fit man, not a young man. His heart beat increased. The pulse in his throat thumped and jerked. His pupils dilated.

I wondered how fast a bear could run.

I felt a sudden blow. Fern had run into a wall. The shining chrome showed no mark. Fern sighed and fell over. Blood squeezed into the space between his cheek and myself. He'd broken his nose. His breathing and heartbeat eased. His eyes twitched behind closed lids. He was unconscious.

The bear snuffled, rubbed its slab-like face against the fountain, as if to get rid of an itch, then looked at Fern again. Its eyes were dark, expressionless.

I cauterised Fern's wound.The blood flow from his nose eased. I sealed up to prevent fluid and odours passing through me into the air, but not before a slow trickle of blood had escaped. It lay on my outside now, sliding wetly across Fern's double chin towards the ground. I heated up; the blood caked, its odour dying. Sensible, but too late.

The bear smelled Fern.

'Fern, wake up; I suggested.

Curious, the bear ambled closer.

Fern, I suggested more strongly. Wake up!

Fern snored loudly.

The bear stopped when it heard the noise. Shivered slightly. Then resumed its slow investigation I was powerless to prevent it.

The bear sniffed Fern's body.

Its tongue scraped across Fern's leg.

I was in a quandary. If I heated up enough to discourage the bear, Fern would cook. The phrase *boil in the bag* emerged unbidden from ROM-memories of a thousand shopping trips. Banishing the memory I tried to remember whether bears preferred their meat fresh. Perhaps if I *reduced* Fern's temperature the bear would lose interest. I cooled down rapidly. Frost began to form.

Fern shivered. He twitched.

The bear took a step sideways.

Its jaws closed over Fern's face.

It bit down.

The traveller stands quite still, watching the traffic streaming through this earlier time.

It is late summer, and the City is dying. It won't be long now. But death is never the end.

Beside him the girl watches smoke rise above the buildings, flame reflecting in the shining walls. Shouldn't we do something?'

'We are doing something.'

'Like what?'

'We're waiting.'

'You wait. I'm going to see what I can do to help. I'll see you back at the ship.'

He watches the girl leave. She still has much to learn. A visit to the City's future might help.

The girl runs across the road. A green VW family pram, magnetics unwisely set to auto, slides aside to avoid her and hits a stop light. The light folds down around the pram doors, trapping the occupants. Fire blooms.

The girl stands, horrified. She runs forward but is beaten back by the flames. And the screams.

Defeated, she returns to the traveller 'We have to do something!' He nods. I know'

He crouches beside the road. Something was thrown from the pram moments before impact. Something important.

He is careful not to touch it.

The girl yanks him to his feet. 'Get real will you! There's people in there - in the fire - and you're fussing over a suit of clothes? We have to do something!'

'You're right.' Turning, he walks to a nearby e-post and dials the trash pram. The suit isn't important to the family, now dying noisily in the melting pram. But it has other uses.

* * *

I felt the bear's breath, hot against Fern's cheek. My cheek. The jaws clamped home. I made myself rigid. Fern moaned in fear.The bear broke three teeth on me. It howled.Tried to take another grip.Then gave up and ambled away to lick its wounds.

I suggested to Fern he might want to get out of there.

Fern struggled to his feet. His heart rate was alarmingly erratic. I soothed him with drugs and current, some gentle music.

Eventually he stopped running.

'Burger King,' Fern announced suddenly and clearly.

Hungry, Fern? I enquired, fully recharged by the run and with plenty of energy to spare.

'Hungry' He confirmed.The bear attack was already fading.

OK. Lunch and then back to *the job,* all right with you?

Uh... sure, okay.'

You *remember what we have to do after* lunch, don't you?

'Work district 10799202 northwest automats block 75 through 100 recover functional suits and restack them for loading,' he said without a breath and without hesitation. I had no reason to revise my nature-versus-nurture theories. I simply dream-reinforced the

next day's instructions while he slept. 'It's our job. It's what we do. It's important It gives us meaning.'

Yes *it does ,Fern;* that's very *good. Now*—what kind of *burger do* you want today.

Uh... don't know... you choose'

Cheeseburger then, with all the extras. And a pint of multigrade oil for me.

'Oil.' His voice was hesitant, a little distracted.

Just my little joke, Fern. A little humour to pass the *decades. Come* on. They'll be back soon. You remember the travellers? They introduced us to one another.

Fern mumbled something, head up, distracted by the cries of eagles circling high above his head. Fern. *We've* a schedule to stick to.

'Schedule. Travellers. Me. Me me. Cheeseburger.'

All right. Lunch first. Then work.

But the travellers were already back. They were waiting for us in the restaurant.They weren't wearing suits. 'Hi!' said the girl cheerfully. 'What can I get you folks?'

It was the first question I had heard from an independent source in over fifty years.

Fern pointed at the travellers. 'Me,' he said nervously:Me, me me, me me! Two mes!'

That's right, Fern, I told him They're humans too, I'm glad you recognised them.

There was an expression on the girl's face I recognised as sadness. Her companion's face was blank. But I could hear two hearts beating in his chest instead of one. Long slow beats interspersed

with silence. I had wondered many times over the last half century where the travellers came from.Where they had found Fern and why they had picked me to clothe him.The work I had agreed for us to do, in exchange for my being used, had often driven those questions from my mind, but they had always returned. Perhaps today I would have my answers.

‘Cheeseburger,’ Fern said, pointing to the illuminated panel menu. The girl pushed a button. ‘You want fries with that? How about the free toy?’

‘Fries.Yeah. I guess. Me. Fries! Me, me me!’

The meal was delivered and Fern began to eat.

The travellers joined us at our table.

The man said, ‘How many are waiting?’

At my prompting Fern answered for me through a mouthful of burger. ‘Enough:At my prompting he added, ‘They’re in Plaza central block:

The man smiled. ‘Thank you:

There was a long silence. Fern continued to eat.

I studied the travellers, wishing I could communicate with them directly as I did Fern. What knowledge they must have. What experience. The girl said:We are taking him with us, aren’t we?’

‘Them. We are taking *them* with us:

The girl looked at Fern again. This time she perceived me. Her expression revealed she might at last have perceived me as a separate entity.

‘All this time, we’ve been talking to the suit?’

The man nodded. ‘What about the man?’

‘You remember Fern?’

‘That naked kid we found grubbing around in the park last week?’

‘Last week for us was over fifty years ago by his time. He’s old now. Aren’t you, Fern? An old man whose task is nearly done: The traveller looked sideways at the girl. ‘My friend here wants you to come with us, Fern.Would you like that?’

Fern blinked I wondered if he even understood the question.

The girl said, ‘To see another world. Other times and places.The people you’ve helped.’

Fern blinked, shook his head slowly, puzzled, and resumed eating. The traveller looked at me.’And you?’

At my prompting, Fern answered for me.’My place is with Fern.We care for each other.’

The girl frowned:The suit…’ her voice was hesitant but grew stronger. ‘The suit is the mind… the man… what, just a means for the suit to move around?’ Her expression radiated horror.

The traveller said, ‘A long time ago, when wars were ended and life spans were long and leisurely, men decided to dedicate themselves to the pursuit of knowledge, of ever more sophisticated intellectual challenges. But of course there were interruptions, petty day-to-day matters men no longer wished to be bothered with. So men made smart clothes to take care of their day-to-day needs, so they need never be bothered with such trivial things again. Their suits took over their day-to-day functions. They booked their diaries, regulated their diet, suggested where and when to take recreation, who to meet and who to marry. The suits were made to last a lifetime. But lifetimes lengthened, and the laughter of children was soon forgotten. And then one day the last original thought was aired… and was answered only with silence. Men had made it so they didn’t need to think anymore. So they stopped.’

The girl wiped a tear from her eye. ‘Please come with us: she said to Fern. Fern belched.

He blinked. He stopped chewing.

The traveller said, ‘The suits had artificial intelligence and lived virtually forever. But they were never made to move around on their own. They were *clothes.’*

The girl blinked. ‘How many... I mean...’

‘Put it this way: how many people were alive even in your time?’

‘Oh.’ The girl fell silent. Her eyes seemed to be a long way away.

Suddenly she got up, fetched something from behind the food counter.

‘Hey look Fern. Look what I have for you. It comes free with the meal.’ Fern’s eyes widened at the sight of the toy. ‘Babybear! Babybear!’

His heart rate accelerated, then slumped. - growls when you *squeeze* him -’

‘Hey look, I think he likes -’ - Don’t forget to -’

Fern hiccoughed. - to *feed -’*

Shook his head, slowly, puzzled. - hhhh

Burger relish dribbled out of his mouth.

‘him -’

Fern’s heart stopped.

The girl stood, alarmed.The toy bear toppled to the floor, bounced once and settled, drowned in milkshake. ‘Oh my god, what did I do? I didn’t do anything! He’s having a heart attack! We have to

help him, we have to -'

The traveller didn't move. 'Didn't you hear a word I said? Don't go near that suit. It's very *dangerous.'*

The girl hesitated. 'Okay, all right, dangerous, yeah. For them, maybe. Not for me. I'm not from their time. Look at him!

He's dying! We have to help him! Maybe there's a first-aid kit around here. Something, anything!'

'If Fern's suit can't save him, nothing you can do will help: Fern stopped breathing.There was nothing I could do.

'His task is done.There's nothing you can do now.' *nothing you can*

But -'

do to

We have enough suits. Enough for our needs.'

help

'But - !'

but

It's his time. Sit *down!'*

The girl sat, crying openly now.

The traveller looked at me. 'Do you,' he said as Fern cooled within me, 'want to come with us?'

YES! PLEASE YES! THIS *WORLD* IS DEAD! FERN IS DEAD! I DID WHAT YOU WANTED!YOU CAN'T LEAVE ME! I'LL LIVE FOREVER AND NEVER BE ABLE TO MOVE! I'LL GO MAD! MAD!OH FERN PLEASE IF YOU LOVE ME TELL THEM! TELL THEM! PLEASE TAKE ME WITH YOU! PLEASE!

But it was too late. Fern couldn't speak for me now.

I knew sign language. But Fern would never move again.

Our task was done.

The travellers built a stone monument to Fern and laid him at rest upon it.

Here lies Fern. Last of his kind.

Monument to his world. Saviour of the future. His suit will preserve him for all time. No weather will reduce him, no animals defile him, so long as the sun shall shine.

And as they worked I wondered what our task had been for, why they needed so many suits. I wondered for five hundred million years. And although I asked many times, through countless iterations of strange life that grew at times upon this dying earth, no one heard, and no one ever answered.

Somewhere along the way the sun bloomed like a wild rose, and died. Death didn't hurt. And Fern was waiting.

The traveller stands.

A world of dreams lies before him.Anything is possible here.And that's just the way he likes it.

The girl beside him grins, shaking her head. As she watches, the first native finally figures out the trick to opening the case and begins to poke at the contents.

What is it? Will it hurt? Can you eat it? Does it taste good? Can it protect you from the rain? From the sun?

Can you wear it?

The girl sighs, understanding a bittersweet warmth in her belly. Its okay,

I get it now. Death. Life. It's all connected.'

The traveller nods. 'Energy is never destroyed - it merely changes its state.'

The girl chuckles. See now if Id've known you were gonna go all Zen on me... ' She hesitates. 'You saved them. Both species. It's a miracle.'

Satisfied with the first of many long steps his friend has taken, he doesn't need to smile back. I've told you before. Miracles are my strong suit.'

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ISBN 1-84435-047-9
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